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SAMPHIRE
A NOVELLA

by

HILLARY R. CASAVANT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major in English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
and in the Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

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Thesis Chair: Susan Hubbard

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ABSTRACT

Engulfed by the tumultuous 1960s, seventeen-year-old Katherine Dayes conceals her pregnancy from the conservative seaside community of Samphire, her hometown. The novella traces a year in Katherine's life, from her summer of love through a winter stained by blood and moonlight. Throughout the story, Katherine endures the push and pull of a culture torn between tradition, represented by community leader Margaret Blythe, and modernism, embodied by the free spirit Evelyn Partridge.

Inspired by the life of an actual eighteenth-century woman, *Samphire* explores the complexities of the 1960s feminist movement. Using vivid imagery of natural elements, it examines opposing views of sexuality and cultural criticisms that women have faced throughout history. The character-driven narrative seeks to deconstruct societal views of teen pregnancy, motherhood, women's sexuality, and infanticide by exploring the psyche of a young woman caught between cultural perceptions and her personal reality.

DEDICATION

For my parents, who gave me both love and genetics.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am greatly indebted to my thesis committee, for their guidance on all things writing: Rick Brunson with his editing eye and Terry Thaxton with her poetic voice. I owe special gratitude to my thesis director Susan Hubbard, who guided me through the worst of writing blocks, inspired me with her talents, and gave me the courage to write Katherine's story.

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SUMMER

The end began the night she let him through the open window. The air, sticky as ripe oranges. Lace curtains breathed in a spring breeze, undulating against the screen.

It was the same night Langston Hughes died on the operating table. Sometimes Katherine wondered if he flew from his body at that moment, glided on faint morning sunbeams across the Midwest plains and New York skyscrapers, and found her—they—naked that night, breaths caught between open lips.

The boy left when it was over, kissed her through the open window, and jumped back down to earth. He crept into the shadows singing “White Room,” low and soft. His tenor entwined with the cicadas’ call.

Katherine lingered at the window beneath a slice of moonlight. She picked her nightgown up off the floor and slipped it over her head. She examined the bed, straightened the rumpled sheets, and crawled between them.

A sudden coldness wrapped around her middle. Her hands clutched the emptiness, rubbed her stiff thighs, smoothed the tense aches.

She half-hoped he’d come back. But somehow knew he wouldn’t.

*

No one would call Samphire beautiful. The tiny town was squashed between marshland, rocky outcrops, and black ocean. And after seventeen years surrounded by murky sea and rain clouds, Katherine Dayes thought it undeniably ugly. She saw Boston once when she was in elementary school, and Canada when she was twelve, where her family had looked at cows and

churches not unlike the ones they'd left in New Hampshire. The rest of her years had been Samphire's. She saw pictures in magazine ads of palm trees and turquoise waves twice her size. She had stared enviously at the cast of *Gilligan's Island*, Maryanne and Ginger as they soaked up sun in the middle of January. She dreamed of lying down in a boat, like the Lady of Shallot, and floating down the Atlantic to Florida, to the Caribbean Islands. She wanted to see New York, to meet its beatniks and climb its skyscrapers, and England to touch Shakespeare's tomb.

To satisfy her wanderlust, Katherine biked from one end of the town to another, always turning back before she crossed the border. Sometimes she tucked herself away by a marshy lake half-hidden by scraggly pines, a ten-minute ride from the Dayes' home. A tumbledown shack bordered the water, its front porch half-sunk in the muck. Eight years vacant, its roof slanted precariously to one side beneath the weight of a rotted tree trunk. Cracked shingles were scattered across the roof. Loose boards blocked the windows. Inside, the shed contained a single room stocked with empty Mason jars covered in dust.

When she first unearthed the haven one smoldering summer day, she beat a path to the water and built a hideaway of fallen branches: her own secret garden. In September she dragged an abandoned sofa chair to the waterside and parked it in her "parlor." The chair's tattered upholstery was the color of vomit, tinged with mildew and sea salt. But it camouflaged nicely in the hovel: a cozy hideaway, aside from the one loose spring that jabbed at her back. There she could sit and catch her breath, with only Plath or Kerouac for company.

Katherine blended seamlessly into the wind-burned façade of her town. The Dayes, a name long-established in Samphire, wore the wholesome look of the sea: French beauties with sun-kissed hair and olive skin and small noses. Her father owned an oil delivery company and

her mother was a staple of the church. Katherine earned decent grades in English and history, and slightly below-average grades in math. She worked five days a week at Willie's Diner, earning modest tips for her quiet service. With her chapped lips and small hands, she passed shadowless through the town, barely noticed when she poured coffee or served fresh slices of pie.

In those days, no one in Samphire would imagine Katherine as a young girl, wide-awake in bed, puzzling out the mysterious grunts and squeaks on the other side of the wall. Or the times when Katherine would flip through her waxy Bible and catch the story of Lot and his daughters, David and Bathsheba, Solomon and his bride. Or the summer night she crept to her window, squishing her nose against the glass, and saw the car parked in front of her neighbor's yard, watched the woman's pale spine bend and arch.

And no one thought of the October afternoon when Katherine was nine and Linda seven. She only remembered that day by accident. It nipped at her back like an unexpected itch.

The sky had been a perfect shade of blue, an impossible blue of marbles and robin's eggs, and the maple leaves crackled, burgundy beneath her feet.

"Take your sister outside, hmm?" Mrs. Dayes had murmured, snuggling deeper against the couch cushions. "It's lovely out."

"Can we go to the park?" Katherine asked.

"May, dear, and yes." Her mother's long, golden eyelashes fluttered against her cheek.

Katherine dug through the hall closet for Linda's flannel coat, tugging at the sleeve until it fell from the hanger into her hands. She helped Linda into her shoes and crammed a hat,

misshapen by her mother's knitting needles, over her head. The girls skipped out into the autumn sun.

"Now you have to hold my hand," Katherine told her sister as they reached the street corner.

Linda's hand felt sticky in Katherine's. Sugar from a jelly donut lined her lips.

They passed the old one-room schoolhouse that bordered the park and raced toward the swings. With kicks and pumps they sailed toward the sky as if they could fly free from the metal chains. The girls' airy laughs made the leaves tremble and fall around them in cascades of gold and auburn. Once they were breathless with cold, Katherine and Linda collapsed beneath the trees and let the leaves crumble against their cheeks.

Katherine was never quite sure where the two boys came from or how long they stood there, watching. With years their faces became like clay stretched across bone, shapeless and indefinable. Their voices were deep yet cracked, in limbo between boy and manhood.

"Hi," the first one said. Silver braces lined his crooked teeth when he smiled.

The other one stood back, grinning, arms crossed across his chest. Katherine could hear the timid voice of her first-grade teacher, "Never talk to strangers, no matter how nice they may seem."

"Hi," Katherine muttered back, taking hold of Linda's hand. Her skin prickled and itched. She began to drag Linda to her feet.

"Where you going?" The boy snatched up Katherine's free wrist, leaning closer.

She pulled away. "Home."

"Wanna fuck?" he asked, squeezing her wrist harder.

Katherine felt heat crisscross her cheeks. The word burned her ears.

“Let me go, please,” she said, trying to hide the shake in her voice.

“Come on.” He dragged her closer. “It’ll be fun.”

“Kat... Kat, I want to go home,” Linda whispered, her voice catching.

“Leave us alone.” Katherine’s voice sounded stronger than she felt.

The boy laughed and pushed Katherine to the ground. Linda’s hand broke free and she began to wail, a wail that burst the autumn leaves from their branches. Katherine screamed as his damp hand clawed up her skirt and tore at her underwear. She writhed and prayed and squeezed her eyes shut, and when she opened them again, the second boy was dragging his friend away. They ran off into the twilight.

Katherine squinted through tears. An unfamiliar face peered down at Katherine. The woman’s hair glowed golden red like the leaves around them. She wore a long white scarf wrapped around her neck and a black coat that touched her ankles.

“It’s okay,” the woman said, pressing a soft hand to Katherine’s cheek. “They’re gone, I promise.”

A few feet away Linda sobbed, curled up in a ball.

“They didn’t get you too bad?” the woman asked, smoothing down the edges of Katherine’s skirt. “Just roughed you up a bit, hmm?”

Katherine nodded. The woman brushed the leaves from her hair.

“Where’s your mother, honey?”

“Home.”

The woman’s lips twisted together. “Let me take you there.”

Katherine shook her head. “We’ll be fine.”

She pushed herself up and crawled to Linda. Linda’s body shook as her elder sister helped her to her feet. Katherine paused.

“Thank you,” she whispered, turning to the woman in the scarf.

The woman pointed across the street to the red schoolhouse, the “sold” sign still perched in the front yard.

“I live just there. Why don’t you rest first and I’ll call your mother to get you?”

“No thank you,” Katherine said. “We’ll go home now.”

Linda gulped for air, rubbing a hand to her cheek.

“My name’s Evelyn,” the woman called as Katherine turned away. “Find me if you’re ever in trouble.”

Katherine nodded and stumbled toward the street, squeezing Linda’s hand so tight her pale skin purpled. They ran until Katherine’s heart pounded at her chest. The sisters stopped on the Dayses’ doorstep, panting.

“Don’t tell Mom,” Katherine said.

Linda’s eyes widened. “But, Kat—”

“Don’t say anything, promise?”

Katherine wiped the last traces of her sister’s tears and pulled her inside.

“How was the park, girls?” Mrs. Dayses asked, looking up from her magazine.

“It was fine,” Katherine said.

Katherine avoided her mother's gaze and sat in the sofa chair. Linda curled up on the floor by her sister, burying her head into the chair's fabric. Katherine tucked her knees beneath her chin and watched loose maple leaves beat the windowpane.

*

The boy appeared in Samphire the winter before Katherine turned seventeen. His father, a fisherman, bought one of the identical homes a few streets over from the Dayes. His rusty schooner docked in the Samphire harbor soon after. The town was wary of strangers, but the teenagers of Samphire High, bored with themselves and each other, accepted the boy into their fold.

A few hundred students had fallen in and out of love at that school, chewed on each other's secrets like worn-out pieces of bubble gum. The building itself was tired and crumbling. It had been a girls' boarding school until the late '20s. A painting of the original founders hung in the principal's office: a trio of sour-faced nuns in black cloaks, one holding an ominous ruler, the other two bearing thick copies of the Bible. The second-floor dormitories were converted into classrooms after the girls' school shut down. The outlines of crucifixes were still worn into the walls.

The new boy opened the sleepy eyes of his classmates. The barely-women spread their legs a little wider when he walked into the room, and the not-yet-men watched him with grudging admiration. Yet no one knew his name. He was simply called Dodge, after the beat-up car he drove. And a few months after graduation, he'd be nameless again: another face in Vietnam, another set of arms and legs, a brain, a heart.

Katherine would see him driving his muddy 1955 Dodge Coronet up and down the coastal road, his black, shaggy hair blowing in the wind, a trail of cigarette smoke curling behind him. Above the drone of algebraic equations or the pining of Othello, she caught herself drifting into a dream world, light as a scoop of clouds over the sea. She'd awake to find her hips warm and pulsing.

Katherine had never fallen for her raw-skinned, greasy-haired classmates. The closest she'd come to romance was a crush on Paul, her next-door neighbor and closest friend, when they were both fourteen. She felt something for the scrawny boy, red-haired and pimple-pocked, who shared her passion for beatnik poets. They were each other's first kiss, one frosty day in eighth grade. She had watched Paul in the pink twilight, scraping the snow from his driveway with an aluminum shovel. The snow piled in white heaps like vanilla ice cream. He was wearing his father's big black coat and a red knit hat tipped over his eyes. Katherine put on her boots, stepped out onto her porch, and stumbled toward him, her chest burning with embarrassment.

"Hi," he said.

She kissed him then, a clumsy, unexpected crush of their mouths. His lips were cracked and dry. When she stepped back, he looked at her with wide-eyed terror and dropped the shovel. Its clatter echoed down the street as he turned and ran into his house.

The next day in English class he slid her a scrap of yellow notepad paper.

"I'm sorry," he wrote in his cramped handwriting.

She flipped it over to the other side and wrote, "Me too."

At lunch that day he traded his candy bar for her apple, and they melted back into friendship. A few months later Katherine recognized what had rapped at her head for years: she caught him looking dreamily at George Friedman, the football team's quarterback, who usually slept two seats over from them during American history. Katherine abandoned romance and settled for poetry.

Until Dodge.

"So what do you think about him?" Katherine asked Paul one snowy February in the cafeteria.

Samphire High's cafeteria doubled as a gym during first and second periods, and a theater for the annual drama club play. Tattered posters from last year's production of *King Lear* drooped against the yellow walls.

Katherine poked a finger at her roast beef sandwich, limp next to a few rings of canned pineapple.

"Think of who?"

"That new one." Katherine motioned towards the table across from theirs. A cluster of pale girls in tight sweaters swished their long, shining hair at Dodge.

Paul chewed his sandwich thoughtfully.

"He's all right, I guess," he said.

"Someone told me he's from Wales."

"What? Nah. Canada maybe. He doesn't have an accent."

"He kind of does." Katherine watched as the boy grinned sidelong at Mary Henson and her cherry-coated lips.

Paul flipped through a few pages of his algebra notebook. “Do you like him?”

“I don’t know. He seems cool.”

“Yeah. But I’ve heard he moves pretty fast with girls.”

“So do a lot of boys.”

The pair watched Katherine’s sister saunter across the cafeteria and settle beside her friends, their faces smooth and glowing.

“I thought you’d like him,” Katherine said after a few moments, careful not to raise her voice.

“You underestimate my tastes,” Paul murmured. He slid his chin into an open palm. “Something about him... just feels off. Besides.” Paul nodded toward Mary Henson and her cluster of friends. “You have stiff competition.”

Katherine flushed. “I don’t want a steady. I don’t want anything. I just wanted to know what you thought of him.”

She wadded up her paper lunch bag and turned away as the bell rang.

*

For two months Katherine watched the new boy beneath half-closed lashes. By the time he first saw Katherine, looked and *saw* her in all her pale innocence, a cold snap had refrozen the April thaw. She wore a miniskirt anyway, in silent rebellion against winter, with Linda’s crocheted stockings hugging her hips. She saw him standing on his boat’s bow as she walked the docks. She held open a worn copy of *Kaddish*, the other hand tucked into her sweater pocket. His ears were slid low into the collar of his jacket. Long fingers gripped a smoldering cigarette. He lifted his head up every now and then, like a turtle peeking from his shell, to smoke.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hi,” she answered.

“What are you reading?”

She couldn’t place his accent—neither European nor Bostonian, but a creamy blend of both.

“Poetry,” Katherine replied.

“Will you read me something?”

She looked up at him beneath her lashes, the way she’d seen Linda glance at boys she liked.

“Why?”

“Because I like poems. They’re nice.” He stamped out the cigarette and leaned against the railing of his schooner. She hesitated. “Well, go on then.”

Katherine flipped to the front of the book and skimmed the first few lines of the poem. She cleared her throat.

““Dreaming back thru life, Your time—and mine accelerating toward Apocalypse, the final moment—the flower burning in the Day—and what comes after, looking back on the mind itself that saw an American city a flash away, and the great dream of Me or China, or you and a phantom Russia, or a—”” Katherine paused to swallow, lick her lips. ““—crumpled bed that never existed—like a poem in the dark—escaped back to Oblivion.””

She rubbed her thumb over the corner of the page and flipped the book shut.

“That’s heavy,” Dodge said, flicking his cigarette into the water. It sizzled, fire on ice. “You’re in my English class, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“Boring stuff we read in there, eh? That Hawthorne guy’s a drag.”

“Yeah, it’s really boring,” she answered, fidgeting with a piece of hair.

“Have you read this new book? It’s called *A Clockwork Orange*. It’s pretty heavy too.”

She shook her head. “What’s it about?”

He smiled, a warm, full-toothed smile that felt like summer, warming her in late afternoon sun.

“It’s a lot of a good stuff. But then, it’s a lot of bad stuff too. Do you mind bad stuff?”

Katherine shook her head. “There’s bad stuff everywhere.”

“True there. I can lend it to you sometime if you want.”

“Thank you.” Katherine’s stomach fluttered. “I’d like that.”

He leaned forward over the railing. “Want to see my boat?”

She smiled and nodded. The boy offered a hand over the side. It was red and wind-chapped, yet felt smooth when Katherine gripped it with her own pale fingers.

“Welcome to *L’évadé*,” he said, motioning wide. “Nothing much, I know. But it’s been more my home than anyplace else.”

Katherine swept a hand over the stern, gritty with sea salt. “Where else have you lived?”

“Oh all over,” he said. “Up and down and up again.”

“Have you seen palm trees?”

“Loads of ‘em. Coconut trees and mango trees and beach nuts. All kinds.”

“And it’s warm where they are? All the time?”

“Always warmer than seventy. It’s a bitching good place to be.”

“Better than here.”

“Samphire’s all right.” He swept a hand through his shaggy hair, tugging free a few grains of sand. “Not much to do though. Pretty backwards here, too.”

“Backwards?”

“Yeah. Like you all don’t seem to know how to have a good time. And everyone gets all jumpy, as if the whole town was watching you or something.”

“Well, that’s a small town for you. Everyone knows your business.”

“I suppose so. But so what if they know? What’s so bad about having some fun?”

“I guess the people here have different ideas of what’s fun and what’s...”

“Bad?” he offered.

Dodge looked at her with black eyes, dark as a midnight pool. Heat wrapped around Katherine’s neck like a scarf, though her arms prickled with goose bumps. She looked away at the deck of the trawler, slick with salt and fish scales. The helm and tiller were tucked away in a rusty cabin with grubby windows.

Dodge slipped a fresh cigarette between his lips. His lighter illuminated the rough bones of his jaw line until the cigarette tip glowed like a firefly. He inhaled deeply, then offered it to Katherine. Her lips quivered as she took a quick drag of the cigarette. Coughing, she handed it back to the boy. He laughed, sending a puff of smoke fluttering around her hair like a halo.

“Would you like a ride?” he asked, nodding toward the Coronet parked next to the docks.

“I live just a few minutes up the street,” she said.

“I wasn’t going to take you home.” He reached out and gently stroked her sweater. “I’ll take you for a drive.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere.”

Katherine gazed up at the sun sinking behind the boathouses. “I have to be home for dinner.”

“You will be.”

He took Katherine’s hand again and pulled her to the dock. The pores of her palms tingled with sweat. The sway of the tide, once familiar, left her weak-legged once she reached the shore. She clung tightly to his hand as he led her to his car. The car rumbled to life beneath them. The tires spat broken shells and pebbles at the sea as he spun the wheel toward Ocean Boulevard. He wove the car like a needle on the jagged road, so fast that Katherine forgot to speak or breathe. Grace Slick spoke for her, moaning with Jefferson Airplane over the car stereo. Katherine’s hand drifted out the open passenger window and sliced the wind. Her fingers felt split open, naked. And when the boy’s hand crept over her thigh, she let it linger there, let it sear a handprint into her skin.

Sea and road filled that hour, and the hours that followed, the warm afternoons and cool nights when she found him tucked behind a shadow, waiting. In the cold hallways of high school they were like fish differentiated by sex organs and hair lengths, caught in the same stream of not-yet-adulthood. But alone on the dock and in that car, she could let him touch her hand, her arm, her breast, their breath tangling together and melting down the car’s windshield. The smell of fresh-caught cod lingered on her skin with cigarettes and soap. She inhaled that scent, breathless in her sheets, after he kissed her goodnight, his lips soft as butter cream.

On the first of May she led him shyly into her secret garden.

“What was this?” he asked, bending beneath the low doorframe.

“I’m not sure. An old shed, I guess.”

He coughed, brushing away a cobweb caught in his hair.

“It’s kind of dusty,” she said, her throat hot.

“It’s neat.”

She smiled up at him in the dim light. He took her hand and pulled her close. His lips burned down into her throat. Tongue tangled hungrily inside her mouth. She felt her mind melt, like he was sucking all the breath up from her lungs. His hand crept over her shirt, then pushed her away.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said.

He pulled her from the shed, her head light as foam.

*

“What the hell’s the matter with you, Dayes?”

Katherine stared at the shattered pieces of porcelain that surrounded her black work shoes. Egg yolk splattered her pantyhose. A strip of bacon hung over one toe.

Jack, the head cook at Willie’s, crossed his thick, tanned arms. His silver-streaked hair was slicked with sweat beneath a grungy Red Sox cap.

“Sorry, Jack.” She crouched down to pick up the soiled silverware. “I’ll get it.”

“That’s the second damn plate today.” He slammed a skillet down on the stove and pointed a spatula at her. “Get that brain of yours working.”

She rolled her eyes. “Will do.”

As she retrieved a broom from the closet and swept the broken plate into a dustpan, she felt her mind drift away again, to the slick leather back seat of Dodge's car. The warm, bittersweet smoke wrapped them together. Low harmonies of Simon and Garfunkel slid from the radio.

"You're acting like a lovesick fool." Jack cracked an egg into the skillet. It sizzled and bubbled in the butter. "Are you stuck on someone or something?"

"Oh, I don't know."

Katherine felt the smile tug at her mouth as she shook the broom over the trash. Jack threw a handful of diced red peppers into the pan.

"Now you do what you want in your private time, it's none of my business. But when you're at work, you work. Understand?"

"Yes, sir." She gave him a mock salute.

"And don't become one of those damn lazy greasers I see coming in and out of here. You're too good for that."

"Well thanks, Jack." She patted him on the shoulder. "You forgive me, right?"

He scraped the browned eggs onto a new plate and shoved it toward her. "Yeah, yeah. Now take this order out there before I change my mind."

She grinned and pushed through the swinging door. Katherine spotted Paul perched at the counter, his legs crossed on the high top stool. She waved with her free hand and set down the plate of greasy breakfast for a short bald man and his plump wife.

"What are you doing here?" she asked Paul, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Just thought I’d say hi.” He shoved his glasses up higher on his nose with an index finger. “So I read in the paper today that there’s going to be a poetry reading in Boston next Saturday. I already asked my dad, and he said we could borrow his car.”

“Oh, that’s great.” Katherine glanced out the window. The spring sunlight glittered on the waves.

“Yeah, and there’s a rumor Neal Cassady might even show up.” His eyes shined.

“Neat.” She rubbed a rag over the counter, still staring out the window.

“So I thought we should leave in the morning and get there early. Maybe we can check out some colleges while we’re down there. I heard Emerson has a great English program.”

“We?”

“Well, yeah.” The excitement behind his lenses faded. “You’re coming, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know if I can. I might have work.”

“Can’t you ask for it off? Or we could leave later. It doesn’t start until six.”

She scrubbed slowly at a splotch of dried syrup on the granite. “I think I might have plans.”

“Oh.” He frowned, uncrossing his legs and leaning back from the counter. “What’s going on? You’ve been all weird lately. I mean, I thought you’d be crazy over this.”

“It sounds great. I’m sure you’ll have a blast.”

The plump woman stared at Katherine, then down at her empty coffee cup.

“Listen, I have to get back to work. I’ll see you at school, all right?”

“Yeah, sure,” Paul mumbled. “Wait, aren’t we meeting at my house tonight? To work on our biology project?”

“I can’t. I... need to help my mom with something.”

Katherine looked away as the bell over the door jingled. Margaret Blythe stepped inside, her low heels clicking on the tiled floor.

Ms. Blythe sat in the front pew of their church each Sunday, hands folded in her lap, eyes fixed on the cross. She was the daughter of the old Episcopal minister, who had died twenty years before. After conducting a set of grueling interviews, Ms. Blythe had personally selected the man who would take her father’s place in the pulpit. She led the Bible study every Tuesday night and was president of the Samphire Christian Women’s Legion. She was also Mrs. Dayes’ best and only friend.

“Hello, Katherine,” she said with a thin-lipped smile. She slid into a vacant table near the counter, smoothing out her periwinkle skirt. “Nice to see you.”

“Good morning.” Katherine picked up the coffee pot and brought it over with an empty mug. “I haven’t seen you here in a while.”

“Well, Saturdays are quite busy, you know.” Ms. Blythe unfolded a napkin and pressed it to her lap. “So much to do before Sunday. Speaking of, I noticed you and your sister weren’t in church last week. Were you well?”

Katherine’s hand shook as she poured the coffee. A few drops spilled on the table. She had snuck back into her house at sunrise that past Sunday morning and slept straight through her mother’s knocks on the door.

“I was feeling sick,” Katherine answered, slowly wiping her dishcloth over the spill.

“I’m so sorry. Must be the sudden change in weather. I think the heat caught us all off guard.”

“That must be it.” Katherine cleared her throat and flipped open her notepad. “Can I get you something to eat?”

Ms. Blythe looked at the plastic-coated menu, narrowing her small, dark eyes, before setting it down again. “You know, you should come to the next Legion meeting with your mother. We could use some young blood in the group. Someone with fresh ideas.”

“Oh, well, school takes up a lot of time. And I work.”

“Yes, of course.” Ms. Blythe lifted her mug, curving her fingers delicately around the handle. “But your spiritual life should come first.”

Katherine shifted from one foot to the other. The plump woman across the diner gave her a pointed glare and held up her empty cup.

“I’ll think about it. Do you need a few more minutes with the menu?”

“I think I’ll just have the coffee for now, thank you.”

Ms. Blythe touched Katherine’s hand as she turned to go.

“You know, I’m always here to talk if you need any... guidance.” Her cold fingers patted Katherine’s wrist.

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Ms. Blythe smiled, showing her small, white teeth. “Please do.”

*

The day was hot, impossibly hot for New Hampshire in May. Mrs. Gibbons, whose husband owned the dairy farm, called the preternatural heat a bad omen.

“It’ll be a devil’s summer, that’s for sure,” she told Katherine and her mother.

“Temperature will snap straight back down to forty by Monday. And it’ll be a hell of a day coaxing my green bean seedlings back to life.”

At the elementary school, the first graders folded fans out of bright pieces of construction paper. In the high school, boys slumped over their desks in a daze, cheeks to the cool wood. The vice principal caught sight of Ellen Kinney’s skirt hiked up her thigh and turned wearily away. Mr. Campbell, the physics teacher, bore long sweat stains in his pale yellow button-down, and Mrs. Durham, Katherine’s English teacher, appeared even more flustered than usual, her frizzy brown hair perpetually flopping across her forehead.

When the final bell rang and released the students from that brick oven, Katherine found Dodge leaning against his car in the parking lot, those black irises burning the space between them. A joint dangled between his fingers. *Meet me.*

Yes.

A slow smile. The scent of gasoline, cigarettes. Red sunlight.

Katherine felt lightheaded with heat as she rode home, as if her bike could lift free of the pavement and fly her across the sea.

She found her father home early, pruning the lilac bushes that clustered in front of the Dayes’ house. The pale purple blooms looked even more fragile in his big, oil-tinged hands. Drops of sweat beaded over his thick eyebrows. Katherine waved to him as she set her bike against the garage.

“Katherine,” he said as she pulled open the screen door. “Come here a second.”

She let the door slam shut and walked over to the bushes. The rich perfume of blossoms spun her head in circles. She planted her sandals deep into the soil to steady herself.

“What’s up?”

Mr. Dayes carefully set his pruning shears onto the ground and picked up his can of beer perspiring in the heat. He took a long, steady gulp.

“You been working a lot?”

“I guess.”

“Haven’t seen you around much lately.”

“I’ve been here.” Katherine ripped a petal from the nearest blossom, rolled it into a velvety ball between her thumb and forefinger.

“You uh—taking care of yourself then?”

“What do you mean?”

Her father shrugged. Took another sip from his beer.

“Staying out of trouble,” he said.

“Yeah, I am.”

He nodded, set the can back down. Picked up the shears.

“Well good.” He tugged loose a few leaves tangled in the bushes. “You girls won’t disappoint me.”

The words felt heavy and cold in the day’s heat.

“No,” she said.

*

The night air was tinged with lilac. Katherine's dress cascaded around her hips like flower petals as she stepped out onto her street. She had scrubbed and brushed her hair until it glowed, almost as pretty as her sister's. Her skin felt unfamiliar doused in her mother's most expensive perfume, the round black bulb topped in gold. She felt exotic, Parisian, drenched in jasmine and honeysuckle. Her heart pressed hard against her chest.

Crickets rubbed their legs together, their love songs loud and persistent. Fireflies winked their golden bulbs. Katherine tilted her head as she turned the corner of her neighborhood. The crescent moon hung like a curled eyelash suspended in black water. She wanted to pluck it from the sky and make a wish.

An ocean breeze flirted with her skirt as she neared the docks. The "closed" sign hung over Willie's door, the lights extinguished. But Jack's bulky figure still bent over the counters, scrubbing them clean. She ducked her head as she scooted past the windows.

Dodge's car was parked in the otherwise empty marina parking lot. She scanned the docks for him. The ocean licked the shoreline, foamy and gentle.

An arm wrapped around her waist and tugged her down against the car. Katherine gasped, then stifled a laugh as Dodge buried his mouth into her neck.

"You're beautiful," he whispered.

His hands crumpled the chiffon of her dress. She tried to push him back, but he pressed down harder. His skin burned against hers in the hot night. Jagged pebbles stabbed her back, gnawing at the fabric. She yelped when a broken shell tore the skin of her foot.

"Let me breathe," she gasped, pushing him harder this time.

He fell back. His eyes flashed with fire. When Katherine blinked again, the anger had melted from his face. He touched a warm hand to her cheek, leaned towards her ear, and tucked a piece of hair behind it.

“Let’s go somewhere,” he whispered.

Her cheeks burned. “Where?”

His lips trailed the edge of her neck. She shivered.

“Somewhere right,” he said.

She lowered her gaze.

“It won’t hurt,” he promised. “You’ll like it.”

He pulled her at the neck, let his lips melt over hers. She tried to hide her shaking hands in her lap.

They lingered there against the side of his car, still hot from the sun. The moon shifted over them as though tugged by an invisible string.

“What do you say?” he asked. His fingers traced up the edge of her thigh.

“Okay.”

The sea nearly drowned out the word, but it was enough. He scrambled to his feet and dragged her inside the car. The wheels spit gravel behind them as he spun them onto the main road. He held her hand so hard she thought it would break. Wind swept through the rolled down windows, blowing her hair out like a sheet on the clothesline. Jim Morrison’s smooth voice sounded metallic on the stereo, ghostly. As Dodge neared her neighborhood he pulled a cigarette from his pocket. The orange flame cast gloomy shadows on his cheeks. Katherine pressed a clenched fist to her chest, trying to slow her heartbeat.

He parked a few houses down from her driveway. He dropped the keys onto his lap and leaned back to enjoy the last few puffs of his smoke. The crickets still chanted their love song. He stubbed out the cigarette in his ashtray and glanced over.

“Ready?” he asked.

She nodded, slow.

“Let me go in first,” she said. “I’ll meet you at the window.”

He grinned and leaned over to kiss her.

“I’ll be there.”

She opened the passenger door and shut it quietly behind her. The single lamp on her street extinguished as she walked beneath it. She ran a hand through her wind-mussed hair, smoothed the dirty hem of her dress. The house was asleep when she walked inside. She could hear her parents’ muffled snores. Darkness crept underneath Linda’s door.

She stepped into her room and pulled back the lace curtains. Opened the window. She saw him standing below in the pale moonlight. He hoisted himself up the porch, onto the roof, and crawled up to meet her. Her breath felt hot and shallow. He climbed inside.

She met him at her bedroom window, numb, and kissed him until her lips ached and his tongue felt raw as paper in her mouth and her legs shook with fear and love. She tried not to think on that night he would not kiss her goodbye, could not be satisfied, the night his skin felt so hot in her hands she thought she’d burn. She swallowed those moments, all of them, for the days after, forgotten, waiting for him to come back.

*

A warm May sun crept up Katherine's windowsill the morning after he left. She awoke with the taste of nakedness in her mouth. Pumped out dry, her body hung heavy, immobile. It was late, that much she knew. The smell of tuna, her mother making lunch, wafted up the stairway, and the sky was a clean shade of blue. The pale sun glowed high overhead.

Someone knocked faintly at the door. She rolled her head to one side. It felt like a fistful of stones.

"Kat? You up?" her sister's voice called.

"Yes." Katherine's throat was scraped raw. "Come in."

Linda slid inside, her long blond hair swishing past her waist, down to the frayed ends of her shorts. She shut the door behind her. Katherine touched her own limp honey-brown hair. Even two years younger, her sister had always been the prettier one.

"I was just wondering—" Linda paused, peering into her sister's face. "Are you okay? You look awful."

"I'm fine. What did you need?"

"I was wondering if I could borrow your blue blouse," she said.

"Yeah, it's in the bottom drawer."

After retrieving the shirt, Linda held it close to her middle, almost protectively, and paused, playing with a loose string on the gauzy chiffon.

"I came back late from Mary's house," she said.

"Oh?" Katherine hugged a pillow to her chest. It smelled like him.

Silence hung between them like heavy silk before Linda inhaled again.

"I saw... I mean, his car was parked across the street..."

Linda's cheeks flushed, a mirror of Katherine's own. Katherine rolled onto her side to face the blank wall beside her bed. She could hear Linda's breath behind her, shallow and nervous, knew how her sister ached to speak, but for once, wouldn't.

"Don't tell Mom," Katherine said.

"You know I won't. She would never have noticed anyway."

Katherine thought of her mother, reading the latest issue of *Screenland Magazine* with a dreamy gaze, oblivious to them.

"You'll be fine, right?" Linda asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

Linda hesitated before slipping out the door. After a few moments, Katherine forced her weak body to the shower and washed away the dried-up sweat caked to her skin. She scrubbed away the night, scrubbed and scrubbed until her pale skin glowed pink as a sunburn. She toweled off her body, almost pure again.

Downstairs the Dayes family had finished lunch and lay sprawled out in front of the television. Mrs. Dayes dozed, her doughy cheek puddled in one palm. She blinked sleepily when Katherine shuffled into the room and patted the couch next to her to sit.

"Good morning, dear. Sleep well?" she asked.

Katherine murmured "yes," avoiding Linda's eye. Her father slipped back into his jacket, the one that smelled of sweet oil and pipe tobacco. He sipped his coffee, the mug usually spiked with whiskey, before fading out the door. He would deliver the town's oil, heating pipe water for baths and coffee. Daughters and wife would wait, watching the sun creep along its high spring arc. The world would rotate, oblivious to Katherine, oblivious to the fist compressed

inside her gut. Life would be as always, smooth and seamless. Katherine settled deeper into the couch pillows and breathed.

*

She waited for him that Sunday afternoon on the docks after her mother had fallen asleep in front of the television, her father escaped to his lilacs, and Linda disappeared with her friends. A cool drizzle had washed away the warm weather, just as Mrs. Gibbons predicted. Katherine wrapped her arms around herself, shivering, waiting beside *L'évadé*. Waiting for his car to rumble by the shabby blue marina. Waiting for his long fingers to slam the car door shut, the rain to mist his forehead. Waiting for his hands to slide around her waist, explore her. She waited until the cool drizzle became a steady pour and the pale grey light dimmed to a dark lavender.

On Monday morning she saw him park his Coronet in the parking lot, late for his first class. From her seat by the grimy window, Katherine watched him crush a cigarette beneath his leather boots, tug his collar up around his ears against the cool wind. The slate sky hung low.

They passed each other in the hallway, but she did not look or speak, as she'd promised him a month before.

"I don't want the other guys to get jealous, me stealing the prettiest girl in town," he told her in April, brushing her hair behind one ear.

In their English class she watched him lean in close to Judith Sullivan as they analyzed one of Shakespeare's sonnets.

"O no! It is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken," Mrs. Durham read aloud.

He did not turn his head.

Katherine felt more fidgety than usual at lunch. Paul looked up at her over his book, but said nothing.

That afternoon Katherine waited at the dock once more. The sun had begun to break through the clouds in pale lemon streaks. She sat on the damp wood and watched the seagulls catch the breeze, dive smoothly into the water. Their calls were bitter, hungry.

His muddy car turned the corner of Ocean Boulevard. She sat up straighter as it pulled into the marina's dirt parking lot and sputtered to silence. For a couple minutes the car sat still. She squinted to see the driver through the glass, but fog clouded the air, steam rising from cold ground. After a few more breaths she began to walk up the docks. As she drew nearer, he emerged from the car, slamming the door shut behind him. He looked even more beautiful than the night his head rested in the curve of her neck, when those black eyes had looked up into hers, bright and full.

He leaned back against the hood of his car, hands jammed into his jean pockets, his back to the docks. As Katherine's tongue curled around his name, the passenger door swung open. A girl dangled her red heels out the side. She tucked her shirt into her miniskirt, re-buttoned the blouse over her breasts. Dodge turned and grinned at her, tugged her close as she wobbled uneasily on the gravel. He buried his lips in her hair. The girl's light laugh echoed to the sea.

Katherine could feel her stomach sink down into her pelvis. Her breath trapped behind her lips. As she begged her feet to run, he looked up, one arm still slung around the girl's waist. He looked at Katherine, straight and steady, blank. Her hands shook. He blinked once and

turned away. The ocean roared in Katherine's ears. With slow, shaking steps she walked toward the street, those black eyes still burning her skin.

*

The boy faded into a memory that summer, became a body no longer her own, a filmy distance. Katherine rode her bike every day, up and down the unpaved road, past the squishy marshlands, the empty shack, the horse farm with the doe-eyed old mare named Mildred, waiting to find him again.

Some called it “the summer of love.” But for Samphire, New Hampshire, it was just another sticky season, a lazy reprieve from the mind-numbing winter. The Dayes sisters played “Sergeant Pepper” over and over again until Mrs. Dayes finally hid the record from them. It didn't matter, though. The sisters knew all the songs by heart and sang each word off key to the ocean breeze. They would sit long hours on the rocky outcrops of Ocean Boulevard and envision magical Lucy perched in the sky above.

Paul left for Michigan in mid-June, like every summer before, to stay with his grandparents. So Katherine folded into herself, like a tulip bud. She would often ride her bike alone, leaving Linda with her cluster of friends—pretty girls with long, tan legs and carelessly tucked plaid shirts, sprawled out on the grass like ceramic nymphs. They sipped from tall glass bottles of coke and waited for their favorite guys to drive by and take them for a ride. But Katherine couldn't stand still that summer. The weight of humidity suffocated her breath. Movement was key. She pedaled up and down the coast until her tendons throbbed and her heart threatened to gush from its chest.

One day bled into another. Long days of pedaling, of working, of aching, of breathless activity just to keep from lying still.

The month of June fell into July, and the Fourth arrived with the annual cookout at the Episcopal church. The afternoon was filled with its usual bustle of barbequed ribs, spilled cokes, marshmallows smoked to charcoal crisps, thick slices of watermelon cold as ice cubes.

Katherine sat with her family on the hard aluminum chairs, sweating in the afternoon sunlight. She balanced a paper plate of egg salad and ribs on her lap, watching a group of kids play tag in the field behind the church. Mr. Dayes stared at the ground and took a quick swig from his beer. His wife fanned herself with an empty plate, tugging at the collar of her dress. She sat up straighter as Ms. Blythe walked by.

“You did such a wonderful job planning this, Margaret,” Mrs. Dayes said, catching her friend’s arm.

Ms. Blythe beamed and tucked a sweaty strand of hair behind her ear. “Thanks, Anne. Of course I could’ve used some extra hands setting up.” Ms. Blythe waved towards the tables piled with food. “You usually volunteer to help, don’t you?”

Mrs. Dayes flushed. “I would have liked to. I just got caught up with... everything.”

“Yes, we’re all so busy these days.” Ms. Blythe turned to Katherine. “That’s a nice dress you’re wearing.”

Katherine tugged at the sleeve of her flower-patterned sundress. “Thank you.”

“It seems like hemlines get shorter everyday,” Ms. Blythe said with a short laugh. “Next thing you know, girls will be running around naked.”

Sweat trickled down Mrs. Dayes’ neck. Katherine forced a smile.

“You know, that’s something I’ve been meaning to discuss with you, Anne.” Ms. Blythe took the empty seat beside Mrs. Dayes. “I’m getting concerned about the young people around here. I don’t know if it’s the weather or their music or the television, but something’s going on with them. Did you know two of the high school boys were arrested last week at an anti-war protest? And I’ve heard about other things. Kids here,” she lowered her voice, “experimenting.”

“Experimenting?” Mrs. Dayes repeated.

Ms. Blythe nodded slowly. “Experimenting with drugs and experimenting... physically.” Pink spots dotted her cheeks. She turned to Katherine. “Have you heard about any of these things?”

Katherine shrugged, fixing her gaze on the setting sun.

“I think we should start up a program with the Legion,” Ms. Blythe continued. “Try to get these kids involved in safe activities. Get them back in church. As a mother of two teenage girls, you must realize what’s at stake here.”

“Well I—of course,” Mrs. Dayes said.

“Good. We’ll start getting volunteers at the next meeting. You’ll have some ideas to get us started Monday.”

“Yes.” Mrs. Dayes wiped the sweat from her cheek. “Monday.”

Ms. Blythe stood and touched Katherine’s shoulder. Even in the heat her hand felt chilly. “I’d love to have your input too, Katherine. A voice of experience.”

The cold hand sent goose bumps down Katherine’s arm. Ms. Blythe released her grip and shaded the sun from her face, eyeing the table of food.

“I think I’ll get some of that egg salad,” Ms. Blythe said. “Looks delicious. You ladies enjoy the afternoon.”

The woman turned, her skirt floating gently behind her. Katherine rubbed her arm, trying to coax the heat back to her veins.

*

The next morning, Katherine awoke with a tightness in her stomach, a clump of red and blue frosted cupcakes rolling in her belly. She stumbled in the pale light streaming through her curtains, through the black hallway, into the bathroom, and sat on the edge of the old porcelain bathtub. The bronze faucet looked dull in the early morning light. She slid her head down between her knees and tried to breathe away the bile churning in her stomach. The pastel pink flowers in the wallpaper twirled and blurred. She felt a fist burn a path up and out her throat and turned in time to vomit.

Katherine stretched across the rim of the toilet, her stomach muscles pulsing against the soft linen of her nightgown. She pressed her sweating cheek against the seat, her insides torn out in puddled heaps. She counted slowly from one, one for each hour of the past day, one for each day of the past week, past month, past the last week of May, past that night, until she reached the last day she’d seen blood. Fifty-one days.

She curled in on herself on the terrycloth bath mat, burying her nose in the scent of wet towels and bleach.

Each morning Katherine could feel a cold hand drag her from her dreams: diamonds dripping from the sky, carnivals aglow in green absinthe, girls with ghostly porcelain skin. She tumbled back to the earth and awoke with her stomach in knots. She staggered to the bathroom

in the early mornings and hugged the toilet seat, her body torn open, emptied. Each day that summer she watched the flesh peel from her bones until her body thinned to a wisp, delicate as a dandelion seed. The gold in her hair faded to a dingy tarnish.

Katherine spent her morning shifts at Willie's fighting the sickness, nauseated by the smell of dripping eggs and bacon grease, acidic oranges squeezed into juice glasses. Each night she stood naked in front of the mirror after her baths, wet hair hanging like seaweed from her scalp. She felt the bones of her wrists, the hard clavicle above her breast, her shoulder blades. Her hands gripped the bump that protruded from her middle like a tumor.

At dinner she pushed the cold macaroni salad around the plate with her fork. Mrs. Dayes gazed up from the television now and then and looked at her daughter, puzzled, as if she couldn't quite recognize this ghost at her dining room table, this ghost with translucent skin stretched over bones.

The rain came in mid-July, torrents and gales that wrecked the weaker fishing boats against their docks and carved new gaps into the shore. One storm sent a tree crashing into the Dayes' garage. Katherine's father spent the following day on the rooftop, swearing as he strapped planks of wood and plastic tarps over the gaping hole.

Linda grew more bitter with each passing day that trapped her in the house. She slung herself over the sofa arm, hair damp with sweat, and watched the fan blow a stream of weak, warm air through the living room. Mrs. Dayes lounged in the living room and fanned herself with a crumpled magazine. Each time the electricity flickered and sputtered, interrupting her favorite programs, she tossed the magazine down with a sigh and proclaimed, "I've never seen a summer bad as this one."

The heat and rain drove swarms of ants into the Dayes' home. Mr. Dayes left pools of sugar mixed with poison in the kitchen corners, yet they marched forward undeterred and laid siege on the house.

Katherine watched the ants gather around the leg of her kitchen chair, one at a time. They stretched their brown feelers toward invisible molecules of crumbs, a drop of milk, flakes of skin, roamed the mustard linoleum floor like punctuation marks brought to life. Sweat trickled through Katherine's hair. Salty droplets fell to her breakfast plate.

She dug her fingers into a cinnamon bun, tore off a scrap, and dropped it to the floor. The ants tensed, antennae quivering, touching the sugarcoated air. They swarmed the crumbs in one united front, spiraled in from their respective kitchen posts. Katherine waited until they had morphed into one pulsating horde, then lifted the leg of one chair and slammed it down. She paused a moment before peeking. The ants shivered over one another, broken. Their antennae quivered feebly. She felt a momentary sense of satisfaction.

Katherine sipped her orange juice. Gazing down again, she spotted movement: a new cavalry of ants, swarming in.

*

Twice that summer she saw Dodge at Willie's. In her ugly pinstriped uniform and hairnet, she watched him swirl his curly fries in a pink blob of mayo and ketchup. The second time he staggered in with a crew in tow: the Jameson brothers, Teddy McDow, and a pair of girls in tight jeans. All of them were wasted.

“Watch me sink this shot,” Bill Jameson said, wadding up a piece of his straw wrapper. He stared intently at the brunette girl’s breasts, aimed, and flicked the makeshift ball down her shirt.

“You’re an asshole,” she squealed, slinking a hand down her cleavage.

“Here let me get that for you.”

Katherine felt her heart twinge when he spoke. Even blitzed out of his mind, his voice had the same cigarette husk she knew well—the one that could split a sticky night in two.

He swept the brunette onto his lap. Her laugh bounced off his chest and echoed through the empty diner. She pretended to struggle before he scooped her around and kissed her hard, one hand pressed against her thigh. Katherine’s skin crawled with heat. She slunk back into the kitchen and grabbed a dingy wash towel.

“God damn kids,” Jack muttered.

Her boss swept the baseball cap off his head and wiped the sweat pooling on his cheek. He leaned back against the counter and scratched at the gray stubble on his chin.

“You know them?” he asked.

“Yeah. I go to school with them.”

“War will get ‘em soon enough then,” he said, glaring as Teddy McDow dribbled vanilla milkshake down his chin. “Thank Jesus.”

Katherine glanced at Jack’s calf, envisioning the Japanese shrapnel still lodged beneath his skin. He caught her gaze and stomped his foot proudly.

“Soon they’ll have their own battle scars.”

She watched the group throw wadded-up bills on the table. The blond girl looked ready to heave and stumbled ahead through the door. Dodge laughed, slinging his arm over the brunette's bare shoulders. He whispered something in her ear, bit it lightly. She giggled and blushed.

"Do me a favor and take out the trash?" Jack asked.

"Sure," Katherine said.

She slid out the back door, its hinges moaning. The air tasted like tears, bitter as unripe berries, tinged with the salt of low tide. Katherine could hear their voices carry on the ocean breeze: tattered fragments of words, the slam of a car door. She clenched the trash bag between her fingers and fought the urge to run. She breathed deep and focused on a spattering of stars. She found the Big Dipper first, then scanned the sky south. Her eyes fell on Virgo, the virgin, her gangly legs sprawled open to the night. The heat rushed back to Katherine's skin, prickled each pore.

Tires scraped gravel, swallowing up the voices.

*

The last week of July was thick with humidity, hanging over the sea like black brocade curtains. Ice cream melted in puddles. Stray dogs lay with paws sprawled in the earth, tongues lolling from their black mouths. The teenage girls abandoned their long afternoons in the sun and disappeared into their parents' cool basements. Fans blew slow streams of hot air on their sweating cheeks. The ocean itself seemed lethargic, foam barely ruffled by a breeze. Katherine and Linda spent the heat wave sweating in their living room, Linda in her bikini, Katherine in a loose t-shirt. She stared up at the popcorn ceiling and listened to their record player strain

against *Sgt. Pepper's* for the thousandth time. Paul McCartney sounded distant and hollow, as though his voice traveled through crumpled aluminum foil. The muted television set flashed images of flames and white teeth, black smoke, long guns. Neighborhoods gutted open. Silent, open-mouthed screams.

Linda sighed and rolled over onto her side.

"Want to get some ice cream?" she asked.

Katherine shook her head, her eyes still locked on Detroit burning. "I'm not hungry."

"You're never hungry," Linda said, swinging her long legs down to the carpet. She wiggled her toes. "You didn't have breakfast either."

"I had toast."

"Are you sick or something?"

Katherine shrugged. The television flickered to a picture of Elvis Presley as he walked down a sunny Vegas strip with his new wife.

"So you heard about Dodge?" Linda asked after a pause.

"What about him?"

"He enlisted. Left for training yesterday. Mary's dad says he'll be in Vietnam in a couple months."

Katherine listened to her heartbeat through her wrist, slow and heavy.

"Teddy McDow went in last week too. His parents made him go."

The words swept through her ears, slow and cool as water, and emptied out the other side. She felt baptized, clean.

Linda played with a loose thread on the rose-embroidered couch. “I thought you and him were—”

“We weren’t.”

Linda tugged the thread free and kneaded it between her fingers. Katherine stood and took the needle off the record, letting it creak to a halt.

“Kat.” Linda moistened her lips. “If something’s going on—”

“I’m fine.”

Katherine shoved open the porch door and let the screen slam shut behind her, rattling the record player. A gray band of clouds hung low over the neighborhood. The leaves of the maple tree in their front yard swayed uneasily, fluttering their pale bellies skyward. A cool wind poured off the ocean, breaking the pockets of heat.

Katherine’s arm prickled. She began to run, letting her bare feet slam against the gritty, crumbling sidewalk. The houses lurched from side to side. Her empty stomach throbbed against her ribs. She ran past the wind-beaten concrete walls and faded shingles. Past the marshes. Past the streets sealed up tight. Katherine ran until she reached the rocky shore. A short ways down the coast, a determined tourist fought with her pink striped beach umbrella, spun inside out. A furious gust of wind tore it from her hands and sent it tumbling down the dune. The woman watched it roll away with one hand planted on her broad-rimmed hat. She turned and trudged back to the road.

Katherine’s chest pulsed with ragged breaths. The salty rocks stung her bare feet. A black sheet of rain edged on the horizon toward Samphire, and the sky thrummed with lightning bolts, fiery streamers that split the clouds. Waves rolled in gray and green spirals toward the

rocks. She wondered what it would feel like to lose herself in that wave, to be picked up and swept away to the black horizon. To sink until her lungs shrank into puddles of jelly. To be swallowed in sand.

Wind splattered her face with rain as she stumbled across the black rocks and dropped her feet into the water. The cold dragged the senses from her toes. Her skin numbed over. She stood ankle deep as the waves tugged her closer, begging her to plunge. A web of lightning shattered the sky. The crests of foam grew higher, taller than she'd ever seen them before. She took one step, then two more, until the water reached her knees and she slid herself down below the waves. The water was black, churning chaos, clawing at her hair, the fabric of her t-shirt, dragging her deeper. She kicked against the wet hands that clung to her feet. Her lungs burned and cracked before the ocean spit her back up to the surface.

Katherine's hip slammed against the rocks. She choked up a stream of salt water before the ocean tumbled her back down again, deeper into the blackness. Her throat ached. White sparks flashed and her head numbed. Her feet weakened at the ankles, and her body slipped down into the darkness.

As her weight fell away, a wave crashed her against the shore. A stream of water and stomach acid poured from her mouth. She inhaled a shallow breath, pressed her body to the stone, and dug her hands into its crevices until the next wave receded. The rain pounded her back. She dragged herself up to higher ground, shivering and choking. Once she reached the edge of the road, she collapsed into the sandy gravel. Her eyes burned with tears and salt water. Thunder snapped the sky, bursting in her ears.

Still gasping for breath, she ran blindly across the street toward the nearest building, a boathouse painted pale green. She rattled the lock on the door. It remained rusted shut.

Katherine pressed herself against the wall beneath the eaves and slid down to her knees, scraped raw and stinging. She let the rain drench her until her clothes clung like a second skin against the small bump around her middle, until the rain weakened to an exhausted drizzle, until the moon glanced out behind a green curtain of cloud.

AUTUMN

Evelyn Partridge was thirteen the last time she ran away from Pawtucket, Maryland. She sat on the back of David Schmitke's bicycle, her long skirts hiked up around her thighs and hair blowing freely behind her. David was eighteen and wild with dreams of jazz and girls and bottomless bottles of gin. Evelyn was wild only with dreams of something beyond Pawtucket, Maryland. Mr. Partridge caught up with them one town over and promptly sent Evelyn to the Magdalene Sisters of the Rose. She bowed her head and read her vows, all the while counting the days until her escape. On her eighteenth birthday she threw off her habit, climbed out her window, and snuck into the passenger seat of Brother Amos' Model T. Following a hurried backseat consummation, Evelyn left Amos in Louisville, Kentucky, and thumbed her way to San Francisco, where she learned the Charleston and sipped champagne with down-on-their-luck silent film actors. In 1940 she stumbled her way into an Idaho commune where she learned to cook sweet potato pies buried in hot coals and grew rosemary and shepherd's purse in her herb garden. It took twenty more years and two divorces before she saw the Atlantic Ocean again, and trekked across the borders of Samphire. She bought the little red schoolhouse and stayed.

Katherine knew nothing of this history the day she saw the red-haired woman in the park. She knew mothers hurried their daughters past Evelyn's home, and Katherine had seen men look sidelong at the woman when she kneeled low in her garden. Sometimes Katherine saw Evelyn walk the shore barefoot in her long, black skirt. But she had not spoken to the woman since that day by the swings. The elementary school kids insisted that Evelyn Partridge was a witch, a

beautiful witch, because she tucked wildflowers behind her ears and strung tinkling shards of sea glass around the eaves of her house and whispered to the stray cats that purred at her doorstep.

It was Ellen Kinney's idea to see Evelyn.

Ellen and Katherine had shared nearly every class since elementary school. But Ellen had not spoken to any of the Samphire girls since seventh grade, when she began coating her lashes with black kohl and leaving sticky lip prints on boys' necks. While most Samphire girls grew their hair out long and sun-kissed, Ellen cropped hers short with shaggy bangs as black as her rimmed eyelids. An afternoon in the Kinney tool shed was a rite of passage for many Samphire boys, though few boasted of the conquest. Samphire both scorned and feared the Kinney girl.

Katherine slipped into the pink-tiled bathroom stall one September morning during first period, choking back the vomit that churned in her stomach. Ellen was perched on the sink, one leg slung over the other, sucking a joint between her crimson lips. Katherine stumbled into an empty stall and emerged moments later, her stomach still bound in knots. She bent down to the grimy sink and splashed water over her face. Ellen leaned over, offering the joint between two red fingernails. Katherine shook her head, already light-headed from the smoke that filtered from Ellen's lips. Ellen shrugged.

"It might help," she said, "with your problem."

"I don't have a problem." Katherine wiped her fingers with brown paper towel. The glow of the bright pink tile was making her nauseous again.

Ellen laughed. "Sure you don't. I won't tell anyone, you know. Who would I tell?"

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Katherine wadded up the towels and stepped toward the door.

“You can get rid of it. No one will know.”

“Get rid of...” Katherine fidgeted the edge of her blouse.

“You know that garden by the old schoolhouse?” Ellen brushed a tendril of smoke from her mouth. “There’s this plant the red-haired woman grows. It can fix your problem.”

“What is it?”

“Pennyroyal. This tall, thin plant with puffed up purple flowers. Smells just like mint when you pick it. All you got to do is chew on some of the leaves for a bit.” Ellen shrugged, then smiled, swaying against the mirror. “Problem solved.”

“Well, thanks, I guess.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Katherine paused at the door as Ellen blew a puff of smoke against the glass and swirled a heart into the fog with a long, red-tipped fingernail.

*

That Friday Katherine crept out her window into the cool September night. The moon looked cold and solid, like a silver coin hung in the sky. She wrapped her sweater tightly around her and crept toward her bicycle propped against the garage. The ocean air stung her ears, legs throbbing as she pumped. The roads were lifeless aside from the skittering of dried leaves across pavement.

Katherine heard the swing set creak before she saw it glinting, milky in the moonlight. She coasted her bike to a stop and propped it against a moss-covered oak. The schoolhouse’s

windowpanes were empty of light. Katherine crept toward the black iron gates that surrounded the garden. Dried sunflowers hung heavy heads over the spiked tips. Chickens clucked in their coop along one side of the house. Distantly, a terrier yipped.

Katherine took a deep breath. The unlocked gate let out a sensuous moan as she stepped into the garden. Her blood thrummed against her wrists like a guitar string. She looked around. A sable-colored cat swished its tail from side to side beneath the ivy. The squash and pumpkins looked weak and lusterless in the moonlight, and an apple tree hung low with ripe fruit. The smell of fermenting apples mingled with the decay of dried leaves, warm and musty.

Beyond the vegetables lay the herbs, what Katherine imagined to be rosemary, thyme, and meadow sage. She spotted the dry, purple-tipped plants creeping up the sides of the fence, just as Ellen had described them. As Katherine stepped nearer she caught the scent of mint on the chilled night air. She knelt beside the plant. The ground was hard and damp beneath her knees, frost hewn. With shaky hands she reached out and plucked a leaf from the stem. The pennyroyal bush quivered and swayed. The leaf felt smooth as wax between her fingers, an embrace of mint as she held it before her nose and oil dripped onto her skin. She shivered as she lowered the leaf to her lips.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Katherine shrieked, falling into the pennyroyal patch. The scent of mint and soil overwhelmed her as she struggled back to her feet.

“Sorry to startle you there,” Evelyn said, reaching a hand down to help Katherine up.

“Please don’t call the cops or my parents.” Katherine clutched the edge of the woman’s sleeve. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do anything, I just needed something to—”

Evelyn pressed a hand to Katherine's shoulder. Her long red hair glinted with silver.

"You better calm down, honey, before you shake yourself to oblivion."

"I'll leave, I'll go home, I promise, just please don't tell anyone." Katherine's voice caught in her throat.

"Who on earth would I tell?" Evelyn chuckled. "Calm yourself down. Come inside for a minute and I'll give you some tea."

The woman's black skirt flowed over her hiking boots as she turned back to the house. Katherine stumbled into the cottage. Evelyn flicked on a lamp beside the door and tossed her keys on a side table. The living room felt warm and snug in the purplish glow of the lamp. A canary in a tiny birdcage cocked its head to one side, puzzled by the light. Katherine fell into one of the armchairs beside the fat-bellied stove and placed her head in her hands. She wanted to scrub the scent of mint from her skin, scrub until she reached bone.

Evelyn hummed an Elvis tune as she put the kettle on the kitchen stove. Katherine heard the woman rummaging in her cupboards, the clank of porcelain teacups on saucers. After a minute or two the kettle began to whistle, loud and impatient. Evelyn reappeared with a ceramic cup in her hands.

"You'll feel better after this," she said.

"What is it?" the girl asked, sniffing the drink.

"Lavender and chamomile, fresh from the garden."

Katherine lifted the cup to her lips and took a slow sip. It burned her throat. She choked, setting the cup down on the table between her and Evelyn. The woman reached over and rapped her back.

“My name’s Evelyn, by the way.”

“I know,” she said between coughs. “I’m Katherine.”

“I remember you.” Evelyn gave her a small smile. “So tell me, what kind of trouble are you in this time?”

Katherine cupped her head in her hands.

“No one can know. I have to—I have to get rid of it. No one knows that we—he never even spoke to me after and I can’t—I can’t—”

Evelyn smoothed the hair back behind Katherine’s ear.

“It’s going to be all right, honey.”

Katherine scrubbed at her damp cheeks with her palms. Evelyn retrieved a handkerchief from her blouse and passed it to Katherine.

“I was in your kind of mess once,” Evelyn said, after pausing to sip her tea. “A few years after my stint in the convent. I met a swell guy when I worked as a Dime-a-Dance girl. He played trumpet for the band. Tall and cool as a glass of lemonade. Dancing to his jams... it just set my feet on fire.” The edges of Evelyn’s mouth crinkled in a smile. “He left the city after a month or two. And a few weeks later, I knew.”

Katherine crumpled the handkerchief in her hands. “What did you do?”

“I was a single girl with no money, no home, and no job if I started to show. I didn’t have much of a choice. One of the girls at the club told me about a man who could help me out. Had a whole business set up in the spare bedroom of his apartment. I remember how awful it smelled. Like mold and chemicals.”

Evelyn paused, staring down at her hands. She suddenly looked her age, her red hair faded in the dim lamplight.

“What happened?”

“You wouldn’t want to know,” Evelyn said slowly.

“Did it... did it hurt?”

“Like hell. Like my insides were getting torn out and set on fire.” Evelyn put down her cup. “I don’t remember much of it, really. Next thing I knew, I was in a hospital bed. And I’ve never had to worry about babies since.”

Katherine fingered the edge of her sweater, worrying a hole in the fabric.

“Why did you tell me all this?” she asked. “You don’t even know me.”

Evelyn laughed. “Guess it is an odd thing to tell a stranger. I just figured if there was a time to tell it, this was it. Maybe it would stop you from being as foolish as me.” Evelyn took one long gulp from her cup. “Would you like some more tea?”

Katherine shook her head. Evelyn disappeared into the kitchen. The cuckoo clock beside the stove burst open, ringing in midnight. The bells of the Episcopal Church on Main Street echoed the clock’s call. Evelyn returned with another cup and settled back into her chair.

“Can you—can you help me?” Katherine whispered. “With the pennyroyal or—or anything.”

Evelyn leaned back. “After I left San Francisco, I learned quite a bit about herbs and things. How to cure toothaches and stomachaches and heartaches. And one day a young woman came to my colony and begged me to help her. Her father was a pastor, she said. Her boyfriend had a temper. She couldn’t face them. I’d learned about pennyroyal from a woman I met in

Oregon. A pinch does wonders on an upset stomach, but a larger quantity can help a girl in trouble. So I made a tea of the leaves and gave it to her. She thanked me and left. One week later she was back again. The tea wasn't strong enough, she said. She could still feel it moving inside her. So I gave her a higher concentration. She returned in a week. The baby was still there. So finally I gave her pennyroyal in its purest form, crushed in its own oils, swallowed whole in teaspoons. She left, and I didn't see her again. A month later I entered the town near our colony to purchase supplies for winter. And the gossips confirmed what I dreaded. The girl was dead." Evelyn reached out and gently touched Katherine's hand. "It's poison, honey. Just poison."

"But I can't—can't do this. My family. Everyone."

Evelyn stood and stepped toward the window, gazing up at the sky. She twisted a lock of hair around her finger, thoughtful. The clock ticked through a minute, then another, before she spoke again.

"I might be able to help you. Get you through the next few months, I mean."

"But what about after?" Katherine asked. "How am I supposed to hide a baby?"

Evelyn glided her hands over the canary's cage, eyes narrowed. "There's a place in Boston."

Katherine sank her head into her open palm.

"I can help you, but I can't cure you, Katherine."

Katherine stood. "I should go."

Evelyn nodded and opened the door. Dried leaves swept over the doorstep.

“Find me again if you change your mind.” The woman paused, then squeezed Katherine’s shoulder. “Be careful.”

“Thank you,” Katherine murmured.

The wind slammed against her, but the tea still warmed her chest, swirling in her stomach. She paused at the edge of the garden and gazed at the purple-tipped plants, inhaled their minty allure. She looked back at the door. Evelyn had already bolted it shut and extinguished the living room lamp. The terrier was silent now, the town asleep. Katherine climbed onto her bicycle and rode away.

*

That night the moon split open and scattered a thousand pieces to earth like falling stars, too wild to pin in the sky. Katherine bent down and picked up a piece swathed in frothy mist. She blew away the smoky surface. The moon was pearly and smooth, just as she expected it would be. Milky shades of pink and blue and turquoise colored her reflection in the moonstone. It pulsed with a pure, pale light that both warmed and iced her hands. She cradled it in her arms as she walked by the sea.

Falling pearl streaked the sky. The people of Samphire poured from their homes, piling as many pieces as they could in their arms. Children flitted between the legs of the adults, using the edges of their white nightgowns as baskets, exposing their pink polka-dot underwear. Jack hollered at Mr. Jameson for stealing the best piece, and Mr. Jameson lifted his dirty knuckles. Ms. Blythe and old Mrs. Belliveau hissed and pulled each other’s hair over one particularly pretty piece of moon. Mrs. Belliveau screamed obscenities in French. Katherine’s mother gazed in sleepy confusion at the stones that collected on her doorstep, and took a long sip of something

pale and creamy in her tumbler glass. Mr. Dayes barreled out behind their house, dragging the girls' old red Radio Flyer behind him. Linda ran alongside, throwing scraps of moon in the wagon. Most of them bounced and jolted out the other side as Mr. Dayes careened down the shore. Katherine caught sight of Dodge where pieces of moon had thudded into a tidal pool. He dived, over and over into the pool, and emerged with fistfuls of light, seawater dripping down the pale crevices of his chest. She reached out to him, still cradling her piece of moon in one arm. His eyes flashed amber when he caught sight of her. Sweeping up the bits in his knotted shirt, he dove once more into the water. The pool's ripples stilled. She held her breath for what felt like minutes, but he did not resurface.

The beach was empty and dark now that the moon had fallen free. A few picked-over scraps remained, pulsing dim like dying fireflies. Katherine gently repositioned her light in the crook of one elbow. It glowed a warm shade of mauve. Using the light in her arms to guide her, Katherine climbed up the bluff and down the black streets toward the marsh. The piece of moon began to hum low and tuneless, barely rustling the cochlea in her ears. Its vibrations grew louder as she neared her abandoned shack. The sky looked thick and black with the moon so close in her arms. It pressed down heavily over Samphire.

Balancing the moon on one hip, she pushed open the door to the shack. Something scurried away from the light, its nails clicking on the floorboards. Katherine set the piece of moon on the ground, gently cradling it into the old afghan she kept on the floor. Her throat felt suddenly tight and dry. She looked over the stacks of dusty Mason jars before spotting a shimmering bottle. It glittered blue in the light of the moon. She lifted the bottle from the shelf and uncorked the top. A cool scent wafted from the bottle, something that reminded Katherine

of mountain laurel and peppermint. The liquid itself shimmered as if strands of silver had been sewn into the water. Katherine lifted it to her lips and let the liquid pour down her throat. It was cold and smooth, exquisite. Her body began to shake as the coolness wove through her veins. With each sip, the moon's light faded to a flicker. She drank the bottle dry and felt the shimmer cascade beneath her skin. The bottle slipped from her hands and shattered on the floor.

The iridescence of the moonstone darkened to a dull glow. She crawled on her hands and knees toward the stone, her head still cool and weightless. A red fistful of light glowed at the center of the moon. She traced her fingers over the stone. It burned her skin. She yelped and sucked her fingers between her lips. She felt the coolness of the bottle bleed from her pores. The moonstone hummed louder as its light grew dimmer, until the hum seemed to reach through her bones and twist out her heart. She covered her ears and screamed.

When she opened her eyes, the stone had disappeared and the moon once again peeked shyly through the cracks in the walls, unshattered. The night was silent again, aside from crickets desperately seeking a mate. But pieces of black glass still littered the floor. Katherine felt the cold creaminess float past her hips. She looked back to the middle of the room and the afghan lay in a tumbled cocoon on the floor. She squatted down and lifted the blanket. A tiny body squirmed inside, sharp bones covered in bleeding flesh. A small purple heart quivered beneath its translucent chest with each shallow gasp. *Drowning.*

The cold liquid turned to ice beneath Katherine's skin. The baby's breath slowed to a ragged shake. Her black eyes widened: black eyes that burned with fire.

"I'm sorry," Katherine whispered.

The baby opened her mouth and screamed, a flood of white moonlight pouring from her lips. The scream shattered the Mason jars to dust, crumbled the walls of the shack to the ground, collapsed the road and the sea and Samphire.

*

Katherine awoke to her own screams. Linda was clutching her hand.

“It’s okay, it’s okay!” Linda shouted.

Katherine thrashed at the sheets. They were cold with sweat and she smelled vomit in her hair.

“It’s just a dream, Kat.” Linda squeezed her hand harder. “It’s all right.”

Katherine gasped for breath. Her mother appeared in the doorway with a glass in one hand, looking uncertain and delicate in her hair curlers and silk robe.

“Just a bad dream, love?” she asked, paling. “Nothing else wrong?”

“I’m fine,” Katherine said. She looked at the floor. A puddle of vomit floated on the carpet. “I’ll clean up.”

“All right, dear.” Mrs. Dayes took a sip from her drink. “Well, have a good night then.”

Her mother drifted back down the hallway, her white robe floating behind her. Katherine began to shake.

“Here.” Linda wrapped her purple quilt around Katherine’s shoulders. “Your sheets are soaked. Come to my room.”

Katherine let her younger sister guide her across the hallway with one hand on her elbow. The quilt smelled like lavender and bubble gum and traces of weed. Linda looked even prettier

than usual, Katherine thought, in a pair of flannel long johns with her hair tied in a loose bun on top of her head, her face wiped free of rouge and lip liner. Linda handed her a glass of water.

“Sorry it’s warm.”

Katherine shrugged and sipped it slowly. She already missed the silver liquid in the bottle.

“What were you dreaming about? You screamed so loud I thought someone was killing you.”

“The moon...” Katherine glanced out Linda’s window and found it sewn again into the black velvet of sky, a white button.

“Was that it?”

“It fell. But then it came back.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad,” Linda said.

Katherine shrugged, hugging the quilt more tightly around her shoulders.

“Want me to get something from Dad’s collection? It always calms me down.”

“I guess.”

Katherine listened to Linda’s feet pad down the stairs, the clink of bottles in the cabinet above the fridge. Water pouring from the tap. A splash of something else.

Linda reappeared with a glass of what looked like cola washed out in the sun. Katherine sniffed the rim. The liquid smelled both sweet and bitter. When she tipped it to her lips, it burned the edges of her throat. She choked and handed the glass back to Linda.

“Feeling any better?” she asked, patting Katherine’s back.

“Sort of,” Katherine coughed.

“Just lie down, okay? I’m going to throw your sheets in the wash.”

Katherine nodded and let her head sink heavily onto Linda’s pillow. As sleep hung low over her eyes, she felt a flutter in her stomach, like a butterfly.

*

On Sunday morning Katherine crept down the stairs of the Dayes’ house and slipped onto her bike. The air felt cold and wet against her cheek, not yet warmed by the slice of sun rising over the sea. Her family would sleep for a few more hours at least, tucked up warm in their comforters. Katherine retraced her steps to the red schoolhouse, the swing set and herb garden. In the early morning light the leaves of the elm tree glittered like flakes of gold and the pumpkins’ round tops glistened. Even the red house seemed redder, red as a crisp apple from the Gibbons’ orchard.

Katherine was unsurprised to find Evelyn sipping a cup of tea and flexing her bare toes in the doorway of her house. The sable-colored cat curled around her ankles, mewing. Evelyn wagged her fingers at the girl and rested her foot against her thigh like a flamingo.

“Hey there, Kat. Beautiful out, isn’t it?”

“Aren’t you cold?” Katherine tugged her scarf tighter around her neck.

“This is nothing. I spent a winter in the Rocky Mountains with just a box of matches and a wool coat.”

“How come?”

“I was seeing a naturalist back then. He wanted us to become one with nature. Plus we were a bit tight on cash.”

Katherine leaned her bike against the fence. “Do you mind if I stay? For just a minute, I mean.”

Evelyn motioned to the garden. “I was just about to do some weeding, if you’d like to sit with me a while.”

Katherine slipped through the gate. The cat ran past her in pursuit of a chipmunk.

“Don’t mind the rascal,” Evelyn said, bending down to the earth. “He showed up on my doorstep five years ago and refused to go.”

She settled her teacup into a mound of dirt. Her long red hair rippled down her back, tied back behind her ears with twine. She pulled a fistful of clover from the patch of rosemary and patted the dirt back down. Whispering to the plants as if telling secrets, she crept along the edges.

“What do you say to them?” Katherine asked as she tugged at a particularly stubborn dandelion.

“Just a few words of encouragement.”

“Does it help?”

“Well it doesn’t hurt, anyway.” Evelyn leaned back in a squat. “Almost time to pick the last of these. Those pumpkins are ready to burst. I thought the frost last week would have done them all in.”

“Is this what you do all day? Garden?”

“I make preserves. And read, too. And go for walks.” Evelyn laughed. Her voice was light and tinkling like a bird’s. “My life is pretty dull, isn’t it?”

Katherine shrugged, letting the cold dirt sift between her fingers.

“It used to be pretty damn exciting,” Evelyn said. “Jazz, dancing, romance, wilderness.”

“Why’d you come to Samphire?”

Evelyn shrugged. “Exciting can get boring after a while. I got tired of living like a drifter. And...” She shrugged again and twisted a piece of thyme. “Just had to get away, I suppose.”

A mourning dove’s call split the cold dawn. The sun sent long streaks of light through the tree branches.

They worked in silence until Katherine’s hands grew stiff with cold.

“I’d say that’s enough for the morning,” Evelyn said, rubbing her dirty hands on her skirt. “I’ll get the northern side after breakfast.”

She stood and disappeared through the door, her skirt floating around her ankles. Katherine felt the usual wave of sickness pinch her middle, and lowered her cheek to the cold dirt. The chickens clucked at her, ruffling their snowy feathers. As the sick feeling passed, Evelyn reemerged with a steaming cup of tea in one hand and a piece of bread with blueberry preserves slathered across the top. She handed the tea to Katherine and took a crunchy bite from the bread.

“Drink this,” she said. “You’ll feel better.”

Katherine slipped it slowly, let it warm her from inside like a blanket. The tea was sweet and fragrant.

“Crushed ginger and a brother of pennyroyal: peppermint. But peppermint will be much kinder to you.”

“Thank you.” Katherine warmed her hands around the porcelain. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“I was thinking about what you told me before. All the people you met and the things you’ve done. And I wondered how you got here, to Samphire. Without anyone. I mean, is it lonely?”

“Sometimes. But I’ve had my chances. And I keep myself busy,” she answered with a vague glance at the garden. “I needed a change.”

“Do you have someone to—to love now?”

“A lover at my age?” Evelyn laughed. She lifted her worn face to the sun. “Not since I stumbled into Samphire. Eight years clean. Probably the best decision I’ve made.”

Katherine sipped her tea. The liquid settled the churning waves of her stomach. As she drank the last drops, the bells over Samphire Episcopal Church chimed eight o’clock.

“Damn, missed Lauds again.” Evelyn wrinkled her nose.

“I should go,” Katherine said. “Thank you for the tea.”

“Hold on. I’ll give you some to take home.”

Evelyn disappeared into the house, her turquoise skirt billowing behind her. She returned holding a sachet of crushed herbs.

“One teaspoon, steep for four minutes. One cup every morning will help.”

Katherine thanked her again and tucked the herbs into her coat pocket.

“Come over again if you run out. Or if you need anything else.”

Nodding, Katherine climbed onto her bike and pedaled back toward her home, toward the sea. When she steered her bike into the Dayes’ driveway, she noticed her father’s Townsman

was gone. She set her bike against the garage and walked into the kitchen. She found a note in her mother's loopy handwriting: "Gone to Church."

Mrs. Dayes' parents condemned their daughter when she didn't marry a Christian. After Katherine's mother met Mr. Dayes, a born and raised agnostic, Katherine's grandparents forbade the family from their home. Yet Katherine's mother clung to her childhood church and attended each Sunday service with quiet resolution. Mrs. Dayes sometimes persuaded her daughters to come, but most often sat in the pew alone.

Katherine crept up the stairs, fingering the sachet of herbs in her coat pocket. As she passed the closed door to her parents' bedroom, she heard her father's deep, methodic snore. An empty bottle of Jack was tipped on its side outside her parents' door.

She remembered being a young girl, before she sprouted another three and a half feet, and seeing the beautiful brown bottle on the windowsill by her father's plaid recliner. She watched the afternoon sun dance through the glass and flow back out in caramel-colored ribbons. Katherine always begged her father for a taste. The way he nestled the bottle in the crook of his arm, she imagined it must taste like gold or sunlight. Once, early one evening, he fell into a deep sleep, his head lolling over one shoulder. Katherine had been quietly playing with her doll Abigail when she heard the rumble of his snore. She let the pink-cheeked doll slip from her hands, the plastic blue eyes closing slowly. She crawled to her father's side on dirty knees and pulled herself up so that she was eye level with the windowsill and the magical bottle. She lifted it carefully with both of her hands and set it down on her lap. After unscrewing the top she bent down and sniffed the rim. It reminded her of her father's breath, warm and sweet. She lifted the half-filled bottle up and tipped the gold toward her mouth. Her eyes swelled and leaked. Liquid

burned the lining of her throat. The bottle tumbled down as she clutched the skin of her neck, choking. She felt a sharp slap against her head and fell into the pool of sickly sweet caramel bleeding into the carpet.

“Shit,” her father muttered, scrambling to catch the last drops from his bottle.

He held it in his hands, his nails black with oil, and worked his jaw back and forth.

“You don’t touch this ever. You hear me, Katherine?”

“Yes, sir,” she whispered.

He stood up on swaying legs and stumbled toward the kitchen. Katherine remembered sitting there in that puddle of gold for hours, until her mother bent down and dabbed her shirt with a napkin.

Thirteen years later and the sight of the brown bottle still carried the sting of that slap.

Inside her room, Katherine lay down on her back, staring up at the gritty white ceiling. She listened to the Townsman pull into the driveway, the sound of her mother’s pumps on the linoleum floor, her off-key humming in the kitchen. The television clicked on. Julia Child’s big-bellied laugh echoed through the living room.

After a few moments, Katherine padded downstairs, tucking her robe around her. Mrs. Dayes was settled on the rose-patterned sofa, her heels kicked off in a pile at her feet. She twirled a piece of her hair around a finger. On the television, Julia Child stuffed a duck with ground veal. Her hands glistened with animal fat.

“Good morning, dear.” Mrs. Dayes rolled her ankles in circles, glazed eyes still fixed to the screen. “Sleep well?”

“Sure. How was church?”

“It was nice.” She pointed to the television as Julia began to pound down a floury sheet of dough. “Do you think I could make that?”

Katherine thought of the leathery hams Mrs. Dayes used to drag from their oven, black and ashy; the blueberry pies turned sour; pancakes the color of charcoal. The Dayes family subsisted on grilled cheese sandwiches, canned peas, and Campbell’s soup.

“Maybe,” Katherine said. “But you don’t like to cook.”

“That’s true.” Her mother gnawed on her thumbnail, painted a delicate shade of apricot. “But she makes it look so simple.”

Julia waved a steak knife in the air, her doughy cheeks wobbling. Mrs. Dayes stretched deeper into the cushions and looked over at Katherine. Her face clouded. “Oh,” she said.

“What is it?”

“It’s just... you’re old.” Mrs. Dayes touched her own cheek, as though startled to find wrinkles there. “How did that happen?”

Katherine shrugged and looked back at the television. An ad for Alka-Seltzer wiped away Julia Child’s stuffed duck.

“Katherine.” Mrs. Dayes hesitated. “Have I ever talked to you about... young men?”

“Mom—”

“You’re a beautiful girl and some boys might want to take advantage of that. I had plenty of boys after me when I was your age.”

“Before Dad?”

Mrs. Dayes blinked and smoothed the ends of her hair.

“I just don’t want you falling in love with some Army boy hero you’ll never see again. You have to—keep yourself.” She fingered the silver chain around her neck. “Do you understand what I mean?”

“Yes,” Katherine murmured.

Mrs. Dayes smiled, the memory relaxing from her eyes. She patted Katherine’s hand and looked back to the television. Julia Child folded cherries into something she called a clafouti. Katherine watched the yellow batter mold like silk into the glass pie plate. When she looked back at her mother, Mrs. Dayes had sunk into a doze. As her mother slept, Katherine gazed at the silver chain looped over her collarbone.

She had seen her mother without the necklace only once. As a little girl, home sick from school, Katherine had sneaked into her parents’ bedroom. She listened to her mother humming in the kitchen below, the click of her heels against the linoleum, before creeping down the hallway and opening the door to the Dayes’ bedroom. Even then it filled her with a sense of awe: the vastness of it, the massive bed, the huge armoire that towered up to the ceiling. She climbed onto the silk-covered stool in front of her mother’s vanity and pawed through the jewelry box, pausing now and then to listen for her mother’s distant footsteps. Strands of pearls and shiny bits of costume jewelry sifted through her hands. She stroked the brooch with pale pink gems and slipped a garnet ring on her thumb before she found a tiny blue velvet bag tucked in the corner of one drawer. Her heart thumped as she slid her fingers into the bag and pulled out the silver locket. She jumped when her mother appeared behind her, snatching the bag from her grasp. The necklace slipped to the floor as Katherine, deafened by her mother’s screams, was dragged back to her bedroom.

Now asleep on the couch several years later, Mrs. Dayes shifted, her fingers wrapping tightly around the chain. Katherine waited another moment, then stood, careful not to wake her.

*

Every afternoon Katherine rode her bike to Evelyn's house and sat in her garden on the black wrought-iron bench, sipping tea, resting one hand on her stomach beneath a thick wool coat. Evelyn pruned away the dead bits of the garden, heaping the frostbitten pieces into dry piles. She pressed tulip and iris bulbs into the earth, whispering hope as they disappeared beneath the soil. Sometimes Evelyn told vibrant stories of her past while she gardened, of seeing Benny Goodman play at a swing joint, smoking a cigarette with Charlie Chaplin, and tossing back champagne with Jobyna Ralston, the silent film actress.

"Beautiful girl," said Evelyn, "but a bit of a floozy."

Other times they sat in silence as Katherine watched Evelyn can vegetables and dry pale brown herbs. Evelyn scraped a pumpkin's flesh, carefully separating the seeds from the rind, and filled translucent Mason jars with soft-boiled pieces the color of sunset. Sometimes Evelyn baked organic recipes she had learned out in Idaho: sweet potato biscuits glazed in honey, rosemary cupcakes with orange zest, and zucchini bread made with pats of pure white butter and eggs plucked from her chicken coop.

Sometimes Katherine watched the sable-colored cat, curled up in a warm patch of sunshine on the granite steps, or gazed at the yellow canary who refused to sing.

"I've had that bird three years and never once heard a peep," Evelyn said. "I think he might be a mute."

Each day, in the middle of her garden or in the sitting room off the kitchen, Evelyn asked how Katherine felt.

“My back aches a bit,” Katherine might admit, or, “my hands feel kind of swollen.”

Evelyn would murmur a word or two, and disappear into the kitchen, returning moments later with a tea of dried willow bark or agrimony petals.

They spent one afternoon at Evelyn’s pottery wheel. In overalls speckled with dried-up clay, Evelyn straddled the wheel in her cramped shed. The wet earth spun between her fingers, whirring into a smooth circle. Katherine watched the shape take the form of a vase as she rolled scraps of clay between her palms.

Their afternoons shortened while the cool autumn nights grew longer. Katherine squeezed a piece of clay one evening as she walked in the slanted beams of setting sun. She passed a father raking his lawn, his plaid shirt caught in the wind. A bulldog chased after the leaves with each sweep of the man’s rake. Katherine paused to watch the dog until she heard quick steps behind her.

“Katherine,” Margaret Blythe called. Her arms were filled with packages wrapped in brown paper. “Come help me take these things inside.”

Katherine froze on the sidewalk, eyes darting towards her own home. Before she could invent an excuse, Ms. Blythe had stopped beside her and set the boxes down between them.

“Where’s a strong man when you need one?” she asked, her cheeks flushed with cold. “You remember where I live, don’t you?”

Ms. Blythe pointed up the hill, where her small white house looked down at the world below.

“I have to be home for dinner soon,” Katherine said.

“Won’t be more than a few minutes out of your way.” Ms. Blythe stooped down to pick up the smallest of the packages. “Besides, your mother won’t mind. She owes me a favor or two.”

Katherine reluctantly slipped the ball of clay into her pocket. The contents of the boxes shifted as she heaved them into her arms.

“What’s in these?” she asked, falling into step behind Ms. Blythe.

“New models. American M47 Patton and the HH-3E Jolly Green Giant. Just came into the post office this afternoon.”

Katherine trudged behind the woman, resting the box on the small bump beneath her coat. Ms. Blythe trotted ahead to unlock her front door and held it open.

The living room was white and pristine as Katherine remembered it, with a lemony chemical odor that stung her nose. White walls met snow-white carpet, and a white couch cloaked in plastic sat in front of the cold fireplace. A gruesome picture of the Crucifixion hung over the mantel, the Christ’s body soaked in blood. On the opposite end of the room, a bookcase incased with glass held dozens of models: Navy battleships, World War II fighter jets, Soviet tanks. An unfinished model was neatly arranged on a small card table beside a tub of glue, paintbrushes ordered according to size, and small bottles of paint. A cold draft wafted through the room.

“You can set them down on the floor there,” Margaret said, pointing to the card table.

Katherine shook out her hands, red and sore from the boxes’ weight.

“Well, I should be going then,” she said.

“Sit with me for a minute.”

Ms. Blythe sank onto the couch. The plastic squeaked beneath her. Katherine slowly sat down, arms crossed around her stomach. Ms. Blythe’s white rabbit appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, its nose wiggling. He hopped forward and perched on his back paws until his mistress scooped him up into her lap.

“Do you like to paint, Katherine? Or make models like I do?”

“No, ma’am. I don’t do either.”

“Hmm. Do you sew at all? Or cook?”

“I’ve never sewed before. Or cooked much.” Katherine shifted against the slick plastic.
“Why do you ask?”

Ms. Blythe smoothed down the rabbit’s floppy ears. “I’m concerned about you. And your...activities. As my friend’s daughter, I want to look out for you. I’ve noticed you don’t spend much time with the girls at church. Why is that?”

“I don’t know. We don’t have much in common, I guess.”

Ms. Blythe’s mouth opened then closed into a thin line. “Who do you spend your time with, then?”

“Linda. And the people at Willie’s, I guess.”

“You don’t have other friends?”

“Well, my neighbor, Paul.”

“I see. No female friends?”

“Not really.”

Ms. Blythe crossed one knee over the other. “Katherine, I’d like to help you if I can. But I need you to be honest with me.”

“I—I don’t need help, Ms. Blythe,” Katherine said quietly.

The woman leaned back, glancing at the image of the Crucifixion, Christ’s body hanging limply on the cross. She stroked the rabbit’s fur slowly.

“You spend a lot of time by the park these days, don’t you?”

Katherine’s cheeks warmed.

“You’ve also been spending some time with Ms. Partridge, I’ve noticed.”

“How did you—”

“This is a small town, as I’m sure you know,” Ms. Blythe said. “It doesn’t take much for word to get to me. Do you know Ms. Partridge’s history?”

“Some of it. She’s lived here a while.”

“Not as long as some, but yes. A while. You know she has something of a past.”

Katherine looked at the door, hoping for an escape. “I don’t know.”

“It’s...inappropriate to spend so much time with her, someone so unknown by your family. I think your mother would agree with me.” Ms. Blythe leaned over and touched Katherine’s hand. “Is there something you need to talk about?”

Katherine shook her head, slowly pulling her hand away. “I’m fine. Thank you.” She looked out the window, where the sky had darkened to purple. “I really need to get home now.”

Ms. Blythe stood up, cradling the rabbit in her arms, and silently opened the door. A cold gust of air swept through the room. The woman caught Katherine’s wrist as she passed, squeezing it slightly with chilled fingers.

“You should be more careful,” she said, looking up towards the ceiling. “You don’t know who’s looking.”

*

After that afternoon with Ms. Blythe, Katherine watched the roads as she walked to and from Evelyn’s house. She learned to spot a neighbor’s eyes peeping through curtains, to notice the wide-mouthed child in the park. She walked the winding paths behind Evelyn’s house, keeping to the forest, her head hidden in a wool hat.

On a cold, drizzly day in late October, Katherine appeared at Evelyn’s garden just as the woman shut the front door behind her. She wore a long plaid coat and her pottery overalls tucked into a pair of black galoshes. A clear, plastic umbrella was hooked over one arm.

“Hi, honey. Want to walk with me?”

“It’s miserable out,” Katherine said, tugging her coat over her wrists. What fit loosely last autumn had become snug around her stomach.

Evelyn waved a hand as if swatting away the idea. “It’s a good day for some beach combing.”

Katherine trudged onto the road. The cat, crouched beneath rain-drenched ivy, glared as they passed. The two women walked in silence down the street, Evelyn’s galoshes sinking into the cold mud. She held up her transparent umbrella and offered it to Katherine. Katherine glanced at the nearby houses but found no prying eyes. She ducked beneath the umbrella as the wind whipped rain through the branches.

They crossed over to the main road that hugged the coast, past Willie's and the shabby Samphire Hotel with its crumbling white clapboards and mildewed shutters. Charcoal clouds smudged the sky. Green waves licked the jagged rocks of the jetty.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" Evelyn said.

An icy wind slapped Katherine hard across the cheek. She ducked closer to Evelyn, to the warmth billowing out beneath her coat.

"It's cold," Katherine said.

"But when else can you find the sea so wild?"

"It seems pissed."

Laughing, Evelyn snapped her umbrella shut and climbed down to the lower rocks, slick with kelp and bladderwrack. She bent to examine a tidal pool, thumbing through the purple mussel shells until she found a tiny snail.

"Here, open your hand," she said, turning to Katherine.

Katherine reluctantly accepted the snail. It reached out a cautious foot, the slime cool on her skin. Katherine twitched.

"Nasty, isn't it?" Evelyn asked. "But it'll be great in stew."

Evelyn popped the snail into her bag and crouched beside a neighboring tidal pool, thumbing a piece of black seaweed between her fingers. A nearby seagull buried his beak in drenched feathers. Katherine sat down on a damp granite slab and pulled her knees up to her chest. A salty wave of sea foam splattered her sleeve.

"Evelyn?"

"Hmm?"

“How many times have you... loved someone?”

“Too many to count,” she answered.

“Have they all loved you the same?”

“Of course not.” Evelyn tilted her head to the steady drizzle. “Nobody loves the same way.” She slipped an empty cockleshell into her bag. “I was seven the first time I fell in love.”

“Seven?”

Evelyn laughed. “He was my father’s coworker. Wore black suits and had a thin black mustache that curled at the ends. Always smelled like nutmeg and cigarettes. Came from old Southern money, I think. I remember he’d tweak my braid and call me ‘little bite of ginger.’ I was crazy for him.” She tucked a dripping strand of hair behind one ear. “Of course my first real love was Davie.” She whistled a bit, smiling at the waves. “Lord, was he something. And so, so tall. All my girlfriends were jealous, me with a high school boy. I got into heaps of trouble over him. He’s what landed me in the convent.”

“What was the convent like?”

Evelyn turned a mussel shell over in her palm. “The nuns weren’t so bad, looking back on it. Just boring. I was a nightmare for them.”

“How long were you there?”

“Five years. My parents were probably happy to be rid of me.”

“What happened after you left?”

Evelyn’s cheeks glowed. “Love. So much love. And then,” she twisted the bag around her wrist, “the opposite.”

The rain slowed to a drizzle. Evelyn sifted her hands through a patch of sand.

“What do you mean?” Katherine raised her voice over the smashing of waves.

Evelyn held up a rubbery piece of seaweed. “This does miracles for your skin.”

Sliding the plant into her bag, she stood and skipped to a new rock. The question washed from Katherine’s mouth into the sea.

*

By November, the lump in Katherine’s middle had begun to bulge at the edges of her t-shirts and tug at the waistbands of her skirts. She tucked sweaters around herself, even during the week of Indian summer, when the ocean stilled, and a breeze that smelled like sunscreen and magnolias drifted through the streets of Samphire. A mango-colored sun kissed the earth before departing for the winter.

Katherine curled onto the olive green sofa beside the salt marsh. She watched the false summer wind nip at the water and ruffle the feathers of a grebe perched beside a clutch of cattails. His red eyes gleamed uneasily at Katherine as the sun crept lower to the horizon. Paul’s words from earlier that day tugged at her.

“Why have you been acting so off?” Paul asked her at lunch.

“I’m not acting like anything,” she said.

“Yes, you are. You haven’t spoken a word since yesterday.”

“That’s not true. I said hello in English this morning. And I didn’t see you after school yesterday, so how do you know I didn’t say anything after?”

He chewed his bologna sandwich slowly and swallowed. “How come you don’t come to the newspaper meetings anymore? You wrote for them last year.”

“I’ve been working.”

“But you weren’t at Willie’s Saturday.”

“Why does it matter to you?” She stabbed her limp pile of peas with a fork. The vegetables spread into a pile of green mush.

“You’ve just been weird. Ever since I got back from Michigan you’ve been acting funny. And before I left, too.” He scratched at a pimple scar on his forehead. “You never told me what happened this summer.”

“Nothing happened,” she said. Her stomach churned with hunger and pain. “I worked and read Kerouac and tanned.”

He looked at her doubtfully, rubbing his glasses with the sleeve of his plaid shirt. “You’re a bad liar.”

“I’m better than you think,” she said.

The bell rang. They stood up and gathered the crushed milk cartons and crumpled paper bags. She turned to leave, but he tugged the edge of her sleeve.

“Kat,” he said, pleading in his voice. “I miss you.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, gently pulling back.

“Want to hang out at the docks after school?” he asked.

“I can’t.” She tugged her sweater sleeves down over her wrists. “My mom wants me home.”

He blinked at her beneath his still-smudged glasses and turned away.

At the marsh a few hours later, Katherine readjusted herself against her couch cushions. The loose spring stabbed her back. She pressed deeper against it, harder, hoping it would pierce her straight through. She cried out when it cut the skin through her sweater. A drop of blood

stained the green upholstery brown. The grebe flapped his long black wings, red eyes flashing, but refused to fly. He held her stare, defiant.

“Go on,” she said. “Fly away. Go somewhere warm. You’ll freeze to death here.”

He narrowed his eyes. They glowed brighter, like fire. She sighed and bent her chin down to her chest, trailed her fingers over the bump. A sudden fluttering erupted in her stomach, like a bird trapped in a cage, bursting free. She held her breath, crept a hand up her sweater, and pressed it down against the bulge. The bird within beat its wings back. Katherine ripped her hand away, as though burned. The marsh melted into watercolors with her tears. The grebe let out a single, furious squawk before lifting his wings to the sky, to the South, away.

*

Katherine walked the leaf-strewn path behind Evelyn’s house. She looked over her shoulder, listening for footsteps. As she turned the bend, the path widened and she spotted a flash of blue through the trees. She froze and listened. The forest was silent, trees swaying slightly in the wind. She took a cautious step forward. She could see the roof of the red schoolhouse through the trees.

“Kat.”

She jumped. Paul stepped out from behind an oak in his bright blue jacket. His hands played nervously with his glasses.

“I’m sorry I scared you,” he said.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, clutching her pounding heart.

“Following you.”

“Go home, Paul,” she said.

She pushed past him. He grabbed a handful of her coat and tugged her back.

“Tell me what’s going on.” His voice echoed through the trees.

“Be quiet.” She glanced at the nearby road. “I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“Because you wouldn’t understand.”

“Oh yeah? Try me.”

“Please. Don’t worry about it.”

“How am I not supposed to worry? My best friend hasn’t talked to me in months.” He turned and kicked a pile of leaves, spraying dirt against a nearby birch.

“It has nothing to do with you, I swear.”

“Then what is it? Are you sick? Is it school? Is it your family or something? You used to tell me this stuff.”

“It’s bigger than that,” Katherine whispered.

“Just say it, Kat.”

She chewed on her lip, watching the road again.

“Everyone knows you’re going to this house all the time,” Paul continued. “Who is she? What are you doing there?”

“Just gardening and stuff,” she mumbled.

“That’s it? Then what are you so secretive about? Linda knows something’s up.”

“She’s talked to you?”

“Of course she’s talked to me. Asked me if I had any clue what’s going on with you. She told me you’re sick all the time and won’t eat. Why?”

Katherine stepped towards the house.

“It’s that Dodge kid, isn’t it?”

She stopped, clenching her fists.

“It was last year, when he first came to Samphire,” he said. “You’ve been acting off ever since.”

Katherine turned. Hot tears rimmed her eyelids. “Paul, please. Drop this.”

He pressed his hands to her shoulders. “What did he do to you?”

“He didn’t do anything. It was my fault.”

“What’s your fault?”

Wind rushed past her ears. She swallowed, then whispered, “I’m pregnant.”

The color drained from his cheeks. He stepped back.

“How long have you been...”

“About six months.”

“Did he know?”

Katherine shook her head. “It only happened once. We didn’t talk after that.”

“Who else knows about this?”

“Just her.” She pointed at the house. “And Ellen Kinney.”

“Why does *she* know?” Paul shouted.

“Shh, quiet.” Katherine scanned the path for movement. “She guessed, that’s all.”

Paul shifted nervously, hands buried deep in his pockets. “Well what are you going to do? I mean at some point people are going to figure it out. Especially when there’s a fucking baby in your lap.”

She tensed and shoved past him toward the house.

“Kat, wait. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that.” He caught her coat sleeve again. “I want to help. I’m just... scared. This is a lot to take in.”

“You can’t help me,” she said. “I’ll figure it out.”

He hesitated. “Did you look into... getting rid of it?”

“Of course I did.”

“Maybe there’s somewhere you can bring it? After it’s born, I mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who is she?” Paul asked, pointing at the house. “The woman you talk to.”

“Her name’s Evelyn. She knows medicine and things.” She looked at the sun, sinking lower beneath the trees. “Look, I can’t stay here. I have to go.”

She hurried ahead, slipping out of the woods and jogging across Evelyn’s yard into her back garden. The flowers had withered to dried petals, the vegetables into brown stalks. She heard the frozen earth crunching beneath Paul’s feet as he followed. She ignored him, knocked on the door, and waited.

“Kat...”

She looked over her shoulder at him.

“I’m scared,” he said. “The people here—they won’t understand. If they find out, it’s over for you.”

“You don’t think I haven’t thought about that? Every fucking day?” She banged her fist against the door.

“Your family. They have no idea?”

“I don’t think so. At least, they haven’t said anything.”

“You hide it well,” Paul said.

Katherine felt a light kick against her stomach. She pressed a hand against it.

“But what are you going to do?” Paul asked. “When it’s born I mean?”

“I’m going to come here. Evelyn will take it to an orphanage in Boston. And that will be that.”

She knocked a third time. The bushes beside the door rustled and the sable-colored cat crept out, blinking up at Katherine with yellow eyes.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Paul asked quietly.

“Because I was scared.” Her voice seemed small in her ears. “I didn’t want it to be true.”

“I told you my secret,” he said. “Remember? Back in middle school? And you never told anyone. Never judged me or treated me different. That meant so much to me. It still does.” He took in a deep breath. “We’re in the same situation, Kat. Both of us are fucked if anyone finds out our secrets.” A cold wind rustled his red hair. “So let me help you, the way you’ve helped me.”

She pressed her palms over her eyes. The cat circled around her legs, mewing softly.

“Okay,” she said.

He smiled slightly and pulled her to him, wrapping his arms tightly around her shoulders. She buried her face into his neck and let herself cry.

*

For seven months the bulge had grown, slow and hesitant below her ribs. For two hundred and twelve days no blood relieved her, and the sickness woke her each morning. And one snowy December night, a week before Christmas, water gushed between her thighs.

The copy of *Ariel* crumpled between Katherine's hands. Pain ripped her down her middle. She felt the weight in her pelvis sink her to the ground. Her lungs gushed with air, filling and compressing in shattered breaths. She could breathe for the first time in months, as if the hand crushing her chest had released its grip.

Panic crept up her throat. She hadn't seen Evelyn in three weeks. Each afternoon she found the red schoolhouse locked up tight and silent, the cat pacing angrily by the door. Katherine tried to remember anything Evelyn had said about the birth, what to do when the water broke, what herbs or remedies to use. Her mind was blank.

She had to get away. She couldn't get into Evelyn's house, and Paul was gone for the weekend with his grandparents. Only one place remained.

She slid on her coat, her hat and scarf, and crept silently down the stairs, careful not to wake the sleeping house. After retrieving the key to her father's Townsman, she plunged through the snow and started up the car. Heat blasted against her sweat-drenched body. Her father had left the radio on, and a new Bee Gees song murmured beneath a layer of static.

Waves crashed against the rocky bluff as she passed the ocean, roiling with snow. Her hands shook against the steering wheel, ice-numb. The road billowed white beneath her.

Katherine turned onto the dirt road bordering the marsh, pulled off to the side, and slid the keys from the ignition, cutting off Presley's croon. She stumbled toward the abandoned

shack through a small patch of oaks and pines, over the porch with cracked-open steps. She ducked inside.

The wind howled through dusty walls. Katherine eased herself to the floor and tried to breathe. Blood began to puddle in circles between her thighs. An electric shock raced up her back and spiraled through her stomach. Beads of sweat trickled over the round bump beneath her bulky sweater. She swallowed a cry and forced herself to lie back on the cold concrete. The shelves swam, the cold metal edges shimmering loose and transparent. She braced herself for the next rush of pain, clenched her middle against the stabbing in her back. It felt like death. The thing inside clawed at her hips, trying to get out, a bird caught in a blizzard, beating itself against a window over and over and over until blood streaked its feathers.

She screamed, once. Her cry shattered the room. Katherine imagined the fat Mason jars crumbling to shards of glass, explosions slicing her to pieces. She rolled onto her side and clutched her hands around her middle, willing the thing to come out. The concrete cooled her cheek and she stopped to catch her breath as the stabs against her back eased.

The sky peeked through cracks in the boarded-up window at one end of the room. The light was the lush shade of lavender on snowy nights. Lamps from nearby houses illuminated the underbellies of clouds. She thought of her mother, scooping up white globs of face cream and massaging her lightly wrinkled skin, the dark indentations beneath her eyes. Katherine could see her now in the whiteness of the snow as it gathered in sloping drifts against the frame.

Katherine clenched the shelf nearest her hand and wished for her mother. She wished for him. She wished for anyone to hear her heart slam against her chest, to feel this thing swirl and undulate inside her.

She pressed her hand harder. A jagged piece of metal sliced through her palm, letting one pain drown out the other. As the metal cut deeper into her skin, she felt him again inside her: fistfuls of minutes so vivid, shaken and tossed like pebbles in a pond. She remembered the calluses of Dodge's fingertips, the way the black stubble on his cheek felt against her skin, the soft cotton of his striped t-shirt in her hands. The feel of his long fingers on her back. The sweet scent of his skin, that mixture of cigarettes and sea. Tongue tinted with peppermint Lifesavers. The blackness of his eyes, a black so pure the pupil blended with the iris, interrupted only by jagged streaks of amber.

She fell into that blackness for a moment—an hour—and awoke again to red, more red, seeping in small rivers. She loosened her bloodstained pants and kicked them free. The floor felt like icicles stabbing her thighs. Pain was constant now, spirals of daggers around her center. She swallowed a scream. She felt a rush around her middle, a sudden burst, as though her insides had split open. And then she saw it, still, on the floor beneath her, cheeks as blue as the moonlight tapping gently on the glass.

A girl, no bigger than her hand. A lifeless doll with porcelain cheeks. Tiny lips, like a pale rosebud, sealed shut. Unopened eyes. She wondered if they were blue like hers. Or if she had his eyes.

She reached over and touched the baby's bloody cheek. It twitched suddenly, a quiver that shook her whole body. The baby's mouth opened, and she let out a tiny, pitiful wail.

Katherine's knees shook against one another. Her fingers were numb with cold, yet her heart felt like fire.

She sliced the umbilical chord in two on the piece of jagged metal, sliced the last piece of life holding her to that squirming lump. The baby's wails turned into tiny screams. Katherine crouched down and wrapped the red and blue body in her scarf. The baby stilled, turning her head toward Katherine's chest, whimpering. She looked up at Katherine through slit eyes. Black eyes.

Katherine picked up the edge of the scarf and covered the baby's face, pressing her palm against that bow-shaped mouth. The ocean pounded in her chest. She counted the seconds until the cries dulled to a ringing in her ears.

The walls of the room swayed. Bright lights flashed in Katherine's eyes. She breathed slowly. The scent of blood caught in her nose. She vomited, still pressing the infant's body to her chest.

With trembling hands she slipped into her coat and boots. Katherine stumbled outside, pressing the body into the crook of her elbow. The snow had passed, but ice lingered in the air and slapped her hard across the face. She fell to her knees on the porch steps and peeled back one of the rotted floorboards, still balancing her bundle in one arm. The space beneath smelled of frozen earth, filled with decaying leaves and forgotten tools. Katherine hesitated and looked into that empty face one more time. The ocean roared louder in her ears.

Leaves crackled beneath the baby's body as Katherine nestled it under the porch. She slid the floorboard back into place and covered it in snow. A trace of blood from her thighs tainted the white. She stomped it out with the heel of her boot before turning her back on the porch. A gust of wind spat snowflakes at her sweat-soaked hair. The moon hung in an upside-down arc over the horizon.

Katherine sifted through the swathes of snow to her father's Townsman. Ignoring the ache between her legs, the space busted open, she climbed inside and collapsed across the passenger seat. She closed her eyes and tried to catch her breath, to rest. But all she could see were tiny fists, unopened.

WINTER

She was underwater. Light sparkled and diminished as though washed away by waves. The world seemed blue, filmy. The water was cold, yet warm ribbons flowed through her wrists. Shadows dipping in and out of the light. Someone spoke. The voice was low and muffled, like a bad radio signal. Another voice hummed mechanically. She floated through the blue, weightless.

Sometimes she melted into black before drifting back to the surface. The light brightened, cleared, then slid behind clouds.

“Blood.”

Katherine pushed herself down deeper.

“Freezing.”

A girl cried quietly.

“Transfusion... hypothermic.”

Katherine tried to swat at the words, but something caught her hands and tied them down. She felt her head slowly break the surface. Bright lights scrubbed the blue edges of water away. She blinked. Her cheeks felt tight and moist. Fingers pressed against her wrist.

“You’re doing fine, sweetie.”

A tired looking woman in thick glasses stood at her side. She wore a crisp white dress and a square cap over her hair. She adjusted the plastic bag that hung beside Katherine’s head.

Katherine gazed out the window. The sun was sinking low and orange through bare tree branches.

“Your family just stepped out for something to eat,” the nurse said. “I’ll let them know you’re awake.”

Katherine’s throat felt dry, as though filled with chalk. She shut her eyes, hoping to float back into that blue water. Her body sank heavily into the starched blankets. Her arms prickled. A dull pain pulsed between her legs. Her fingers felt stiff and brittle.

Someone gently knocked at the door. Katherine looked over as Linda stepped inside.

“Hey, Kat,” Linda said. Her lips were pale. “How are you doing?”

Katherine shrugged and laid one hand on top of the other. She noticed the pipes and wires that linked her to a gray box, beeping beside the bed, and a plastic bag filled with clear liquid. The sun inched further behind the treetops.

“You’ve been asleep for ten hours,” Linda said. Her chin quivered as she spoke. “Do you remember? Mom and I came around nine, right after they got you here. Dad would have come too, but you know. It’s the busy season. Mom is calling him now.”

Katherine picked at the yellow tape that held the pipe to her vein.

“You should see how much it snowed last night,” Linda continued. “There’s at least six inches in the driveway. Too bad it wasn’t a school day. We would’ve gotten a snow day for sure.”

Katherine’s head sank deeper into the pillow. Linda kneeled down beside the bed, her fingers trailing on the edge of the bedspread.

“Kat.” Her voice cracked. “The police have been talking to us all day. They’re gonna want—gonna ask you what happened. There’s newspaper people outside too, but we haven’t

said anything to them.” Linda bent her head down to Katherine’s arm. Tears traced the edges of her cheekbones. “Oh my God. What happened?”

Katherine ran her tongue over her teeth. Her eyes felt oddly dry, as if they’d been drained the night before.

“The doctor said you were—but it’s not true? You would’ve told me. Something just went wrong, right?”

“Yes.” The word felt strange and slow in Katherine’s throat. “Something went wrong.”

Linda’s cheeks grayed. She raked her fingers through her hair. A few golden strands floated to the linoleum floor like feathers. She opened her mouth, but closed it again as the door opened softly. Mrs. Dayes stepped inside and shut the door behind her. Her cheeks were pink as always, though a single line creased the space between her brows.

“Hello, Katherine,” she said. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine I guess.”

“Have they given you anything to eat?” She tugged at the silver chain around her neck. “You’re probably hungry.”

“No.”

Katherine noticed the emptiness in her middle, the absence. She pressed her hands over her stomach, still bulging. She suddenly missed the wings that had fluttered there.

“I brought some magazines if you want them.” Mrs. Dayes settled a few flimsy gossip rags onto the white sheets. “I’ve read them to pieces.”

“Thanks,” Katherine said. The model on one of the covers wore bright red lipstick, a plastic grin.

Mrs. Dayes sat down in the green leather chair beside the bed. She crossed one pantyhose-clad leg over her knee and examined her fingernails. Linda smoothed the edge of Katherine's bed sheet.

The door rattled open again and a doctor stepped inside. Wrinkles lined his skin. His bald head glowed beneath the harsh fluorescent lights. He nodded to Katherine's mother.

"Mrs. Dayes. Mind if I have a few minutes with Katherine?"

"Of course." Her mother rose and patted Katherine's knee beneath the sheets. "We'll just be outside, then."

Linda looked back at Katherine as she followed her mother to the waiting room. Her eyes glistened.

The doctor looked down at his clipboard.

"Are you experiencing any pain?"

"A little."

"Where?"

"My back, I guess. My feet. My—" Katherine's cheeks warmed. She glanced down.

He scribbled on his clipboard with a ballpoint pen. "That's normal. The pain should fade in a couple days. Any dizziness or light headedness?"

"Not really."

He nodded, still scribbling. "Your temperature is back to normal. It was pretty low when the paramedics brought you in. Moderate hypothermia. Mild frostnip on your feet. You may experience some pain and sensitivity there, but it should clear up in a week. We've got you on an IV for fluids and for the pain. You were dehydrated this morning. Heart rate and blood

pressure are a little low, but non-threatening. You lost quite a lot of blood.” The doctor looked up. “Postpartum hemorrhage. Had to give you a hefty blood transfusion. You’ll probably develop anemia so we’ll put you on some iron supplements. You’ll have to stay here overnight so we can keep an eye on things.”

Katherine swallowed his words down like a thick pill. He lowered the clipboard, his eyes softening.

“You’ll be okay, Katherine,” he said quietly. He cleared his throat. “I’d like to bring in someone to talk with you about what happened. That all right with you?”

“I guess so.”

“Unfortunately you’ll also have to talk with the police. They’re getting antsy, but I think it’s best that you have more time to rest. Unless you’re feeling up for it?”

She shook her head. He clicked the top of his pen and slid it into the breast pocket of his coat. A dot of black ink stained the fabric.

“The orderly will be along with your dinner soon. Do you have any questions for me?”

“No.”

“Want me to send your family back in?”

Katherine sank down further beneath the sheets. “Can I be alone? Please.”

He nodded, turned to leave, and paused.

“You’re seventeen?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“My daughter’s your age.”

She blinked up at him. His tired mouth creased at the seams. He cleared his throat and shut the door behind him.

*

“Tell us again what happened. You were in your room and then...?”

Katherine’s head throbbed against her skull. Her throat felt raw.

The nurse had released her from the IV that morning. Katherine slowly dressed herself in the sweater and jeans Linda had brought from home. Brushed her matted hair. A pair of police officers led her down the hall to a cramped room. Crimson flowers dotted the white wallpaper. The policemen sat opposite her in the same uncomfortable green chairs from her hospital room, a large tape recorder between them. One of them kept quiet: a young-looking rookie with ashy blond hair and nervous eyes. The other, Officer Jordan, was older, grayer, with a large, crooked nose that tilted to one side. The badges on the policemen’s chests glinted in the overhead light. She told them again: the shack, the blood, the snow.

She threw herself back into that night, for the third or fourth or fifth time that morning, pummeled like ocean waves or bad dreams. She inhaled, preparing to tell them the end again.

“And she was born—” Katherine swallowed, turning the lie around in her mouth. “She was dead when she was born.”

“How did you know the infant was deceased?”

“She was blue and still. She never made a sound.”

“Did you try to resuscitate the infant?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I didn’t think—I just assumed—”

Katherine glanced down at the black tape rolling around and around on its disc.

Officer Jordan leaned back in his chair. “What did you do with the infant’s body, Miss Dayes?”

“I put it underneath the porch.”

He bobbed his head. “And why did you put it there?”

“I didn’t want anything getting it.”

“Were you hiding the body?”

“No.”

“But you didn’t want anyone to find the body?”

“I just—didn’t want anyone to know.” Her blood, a stranger’s blood, throbbed in her ears.

“Why didn’t you want anyone to know?”

He asked her this each time she told her story. And each time she ducked her head and could not answer.

The officer leaned back after allowing her to sit there a moment, silent.

“Who is the father of the infant?”

She closed her mouth.

“Miss Dayes, this will go a lot smoother if you cooperate with us. We’re not accusing you of anything. We’re just trying to get the facts.”

“I told you everything. I—I didn’t kill her.”

Officer Jordan studied her for a moment, then pressed his hands to his knees and stood. His bones cracked.

“You can return to your parents now, Miss Dayes. Schmitt, you’ll take care of the recording?”

The younger man nodded, his neck flushed. Katherine rose slowly and walked toward the door. The painkillers from that morning had faded, and the space between her legs throbbed with a dull pain. Officer Jordan stopped her at the door, pressing a firm hand against her shoulder.

“You’ll stay in your parents’ house for the next couple of days. We’ll need to talk again, okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

He stepped aside. She began the long walk down the bright hallway, clean and chemical. Nurses bustled past her with their noses buried in charts and folders. A middle-aged woman sat on a bench, her eyes rimmed red and swollen. Disembodied voices drifted from each room, urgent or weak. Out of habit, Katherine slid one hand over her stomach.

Her father stood at the end of the hallway, looking large and gritty in the sanitary white of the hospital. She had not seen him since the Dayes had sat at the dinner table two nights before, scooping coleslaw into their mouths and watching snow pummel the windowpanes.

He looked past her. Black oil was caked underneath his nails and thick bags hung beneath his eyes. He wore a slate blue coat embroidered with his company name. She traced the crimson letters of “Dayes Oil and Fuel” with her eyes.

He silently handed her a coat. His boots slapped the linoleum floor as he turned and walked toward the stairwell. Katherine followed, her head bent low. They stepped out of the warm hull of the hospital into the snow-chiseled air. Tufts of pale gray clouds hovered over the port. Distant smoke pooled over the shipyard factories. She imagined the shouts of the naval prison inmates, their laughs and whistles riding the cold morning air.

Katherine climbed into her father's delivery truck, the cab's air thick with oil. She hugged her shoulders and glanced at the driver's seat. Her father's jaw was tight, his blue eyes frozen to the road.

The truck slid across the town lines into Samphire. A television station van from Boston was parked outside the town hall. A newswoman clutched a microphone between black-gloved fingers, staring intensely into the camera. Katherine sank down into the passenger seat.

Their neighbor across the street looked up when the truck pulled into the Dayes' driveway. His shovelful of snow hung suspended in midair. He squinted at Katherine as she climbed out of her seat, wincing at the pain throbbing in her pelvis. A gust of wind swept up a few loose flakes from his shovel. She felt his cold eyes slice through the lining of her coat. Katherine hid behind her hair and followed the backs of her father's boots. They climbed up the stone steps and walked through the creaking front door.

Her mother sat on the couch, the television screen unusually black. Her gaze was soft and unfocused at the window. A copy of yesterday's newspaper lay unopened on the coffee table, the headline bolded at the top:

"Newborn found dead in abandoned building."

Her father pushed past Katherine into the kitchen, leaving a cold gust of air behind him. Katherine stepped towards the couch.

“Mom—”

Mrs. Dayes took a sip from her glass. The clear liquid inside looked thick, almost gel-like.

“Not now, dear,” she said, waving her away.

Katherine slid back towards the stairs and climbed them to her room. She let her coat slip off her arms onto the floor, lifted the corners of her bedspread, and eased herself between the sheets. Wind slammed into her windowpane, shaking the glass as she rocked herself to sleep.

*

Katherine remained in her bed for days, drifting between sleep and the yellowy pages of her books. Blood and moonlight haunted her dreams, baby-sized fists clenching and unclenching. She did not see her father, only heard his boots thud through the hallway early each morning and back again late each night. Her mother hovered in the doorway sometimes, opening her silent mouth like a fish on land.

Linda brought plates of food heaped with temptations that Katherine refused to eat. She choked down small bites in front of her sister, if only to wipe away a bit of Linda’s worry.

“What are they saying at school?” Katherine asked her on the third night. She held a plate of cold shepherd’s pie in her hands.

Linda hesitated, fumbling with the charms around her wrist.

“It’s midterms this week,” she answered finally. “Everyone’s busy with that.”

Katherine nodded, doubtful.

“I haven’t told them anything,” Linda said.

Katherine pushed a kernel of corn around the plate with her fork.

“Everyone will forget about it soon. Christmas break starts the day after tomorrow, and after New Year’s no one will even care.”

“I’m sorry,” Katherine said quietly.

“For what?”

“That I did this to you.”

“You didn’t do anything.”

“It must be awful for you there.”

Linda pressed her lips together, looking more serious than Katherine had ever seen her.

“It’s fine.” She looked down at the untouched plate of food. “What are you going to do?”

“About what?”

“About any of this. I mean, you have to go back to school.”

Katherine leaned deeper into her pillows.

“And Dodge.” A blush crept up Linda’s cheeks. “Did—did he know?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think you were...” Linda’s hands fumbled over her lap, as though trying to pluck the word from air. “I thought you would’ve told me.”

“I’m sorry,” Katherine said. She rolled over on her side.

Her sister’s eyes flickered between hurt and anger. She picked up the plate and left the room, letting the door click shut behind her.

*

They called her “the blizzard baby” in the papers, after the nor’easter that hit New England the night she was born. The storm dumped snow on Samphire and knocked out blocks of power for a couple days. When the ice was scraped from the concrete and gritty salt spread over the pavement, the people of Samphire formed a miniature pilgrimage to the abandoned shack. Onlookers stamped away the last drops of Katherine’s blood. Teary mothers piled dolls and teddy bears and cheap roses by the yellow police tape.

Each day the newspapers found a new angle to probe, a new expert to interview, a classmate or teacher to talk to. Linda tried to hide the newspapers from her sister, but Katherine found them shoved beneath a stack of unopened bills on the kitchen counter. She stared at her name, the words “Katherine Dayes” printed in plain text below a photo of the shack, her secret exposed on the front page.

“This is an isolated incident that in no way represents the people of Samphire,” Mayor Flanigan was quoted in one article. “We’re a quiet community with good, hard-working people. We won’t allow this misfortune to affect us.”

Parades of cars drove past Katherine’s house, license plates from Maine, Massachusetts, New York. A group of women from a neighboring town clustered across the street, waving signs with “Justice for Babies” and “God Bless the Little Children” scrawled across them. Other signs simply said “Whore” and “Murderer.”

A police officer patrolled their neighborhood day and night, either to keep Katherine in or everyone else out.

Mrs. Dayes kept the blinds drawn tight and the house dark.

*

It was Christmas Eve. Katherine knew from the echo of church bells on the clear winter night and the smell of her mother's thick perfume, mustier than her usual scent, which she wore only on special occasions. Katherine had let her copy of Blake's poems fall to the floor after the sun faded to a pale blue. She lay still, listening to the bells.

Mrs. Dayes' heels clicked down the hallway. She knocked lightly on Katherine's door.

"Katherine?" The door opened, allowing a yellow strip of light into the bedroom. "We're going to the Christmas service soon."

"Okay."

"I'm not sure what time your father will be home." Mrs. Dayes clipped an earring to her un-pierced lobes. Her fingers shook. "You'll be all right?"

"Yeah."

Her mother shut the door quickly, anxiously. Katherine listened to the muffled voices of her mother and sister, the bustle of coats and hats and boots, the screen door creaking shut, and the groan of the Townsman's engine.

The scent of her own unwashed skin churned Katherine's stomach. She ran her fingers through her hair, tangled and caked in grease. Her mouth tasted stale and bitter.

She eased her body out of bed and slipped down the hall into the bathroom. The rose-studded wallpaper had begun to peel in curls and tendrils that cascaded to the floor. Loose threads dangled from the damp bathmat.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the tarnished mirror over the sink. Her cheeks were swollen, lips puffy. Dark lines sliced the spaces beneath her eyes and aged her far past seventeen. She pressed at the lines, leaving shadowy fingerprint marks on her skin.

Katherine turned away and stripped her shirt off her shoulders. She turned the shower on full force and submerged into the scalding water. With sudsy hands she scrubbed her body, the sagging skin of her stomach. The steam gathered like a crown over her head. When her arms were tingling pink, she slid out of the tub and found a sweater and jeans to drape over her bones before she stepped outside into the night.

The air was cold, clear. The moon hung round like a polished pearl on a woman's bracelet. Katherine looked to the south where Orion thrust his hips toward earth. He raised his bow high, arrow aimed to pierce. Katherine shivered down to her snow boots and began to walk.

The streets and houses were deserted. Strings of rainbow-colored Christmas lights lit up the living room windows of a few homes. The kitschy colors became muted pastels reflected on the snow banks. Golden light spilled onto Katherine's head as she passed beneath the corner streetlamp. Ice crystals had formed onto her dripping hair and separated the strands into tight icicles.

As she neared the old schoolhouse, she caught strains of Christmas carols gliding on the still night air. Somewhere a soprano warbled through "Away in a Manger." She imagined the pews full of families, their mouths rounded in off-key strains of "Gloria."

At the iron fence Katherine spotted a cat's paw prints pressed into the snow. A single lamp in the living room shined in Evelyn's house. No Christmas wreath hung on the door, no gaudy lights looped around a tree. A slow stream of smoke gathered in clouds over the chimney. The air smelled rich with burnt maple wood. She waited at the gate, still shivering.

The door opened and Evelyn's black silhouette obstructed the light from her living room.

"You gonna come in, honey?" she asked, tightening the robe around her waist.

Katherine nodded. The snow crunched beneath her feet as she stepped across the lawn.

“You look colder than an ice queen,” Evelyn said, shutting out the winter air behind them.

It had been over a month since Katherine stepped into that house. Evelyn seemed unfamiliar, somehow, in her paisley-patterned robe and slippers, her long hair flowing over one shoulder like liquid copper.

The living room was warm and snug. A few boxes labeled “kitchen” were stacked alongside the wall. A copy of *Lolita* was slung over the arm of a sofa chair.

“Is this how you celebrate Christmas?” Katherine asked, motioning towards the book.

“Usually,” Evelyn said as she walked into the kitchen.

“I thought you’d be at church,” Katherine said.

Evelyn laughed from the other room. A cup clinked against the counter.

“I don’t think I’d get past the threshold,” she said.

“You don’t spend it with friends or family or anyone?”

Evelyn returned and handed Katherine a chipped, rose-colored mug. Her eyes seemed dark and distant.

“Christmas has never been my favorite holiday,” she said.

Katherine sipped the thick hot chocolate. Peppermint oils and crushed hazelnut danced over her tongue. It warmed her throat and spread heat through her veins. The icicles in her hair began to melt, leaving damp circles on her sweater.

“You were gone for so long,” Katherine said finally. “It was like you disappeared.”

“I had... a personal matter.” Evelyn kneaded the fabric of her robe. “I have to leave, Katherine.”

“Where?”

“I bought a place in New York. It’s near a lake...”

“When are you going?”

“In a few days.”

Katherine nodded slowly, her throat tight.

“I’m sorry,” Evelyn said. “I don’t want to leave you with all this, but I—I can’t stay.”

“You heard what happened, then?” Katherine asked.

Evelyn rested her mug on her lap. “I did.”

“They think I killed her,” Katherine said.

“You didn’t.” Evelyn’s voice lilted at the end, turning the words into an almost-question.

“I didn’t know what to do,” Katherine said. “It happened so fast. And you were gone. I panicked.”

A shadow crossed Evelyn’s eyes. The fire in the woodstove crackled over pieces of newspaper. Katherine watched the words on the pages curl and disintegrate.

“I’m so sorry.” Evelyn seemed younger somehow, as if all of her years rushed out in that breath. “I should’ve told you, should’ve prepared you for this. It’s my fault. If I could take it back, I would.”

“Maybe I should’ve taken care of it,” Katherine said. “Before. When I had the chance.”

The canary, his warm feathers fluffed, lifted his head and blinked thoughtfully. Evelyn wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her robe. Silence passed between them as her finger traced the loopy “L” on her book cover.

“‘Maybe’ is a big word,” Evelyn said at last. “It brings all kinds of stories, all kinds of made-up endings of what ‘might’ have happened ‘if only.’” The church bells chimed again. Evelyn gazed out the window. “‘Maybe’ we could’ve done this or ‘maybe’ you could’ve done that. But the fact is, you didn’t. I didn’t. And it happened. We can’t change that now.”

The canary re-tucked his beak into his wings, wiggling down into a tight yellow ball.

“I can’t face them,” Katherine said. “Everyone will know. And wonder.”

“Your body is none of their damn business.” Evelyn’s voice shook.

Katherine bent over her mug, holding it tight. “I’m scared.”

Evelyn reached over and touched Katherine’s hand. Evelyn’s skin felt smooth yet gritty, like a worn seashell.

“No one will ever understand what you did or why you did it. They’ll make their own judgments and probably hate you for it. But they don’t know what happened that night or that month or that year. Only you do. Now you’re gonna get through the next few months, chin up. And then you get the hell out of this town.” Evelyn held Katherine’s gaze. “It’s not over yet, honey.”

The two women sat in silence, listening to the fire crackle and feed upon itself, flames writhing and dying into ash. Katherine’s veins warmed from the inside out. She let her eyelids hover and close, hover and close, until sleep swept her up into the night and carried her over the snowy rooftops to the sky.

*

The Dayes' house was a dark hollow amid homes decked in rainbow lights and silver bows. No tree in silver tinsel, or gifts wrapped in bright paper. When Katherine returned home late that night, still warm with sleep, she stepped into that gloom of absence.

Her head felt light and weary as she climbed the stairs. Her boots left a trail of gray snowdrops on the carpet. When she pushed open the door to her bedroom, she saw Linda's slender frame spread out over her bedspread. Her hair glowed in the moonlight that crept through the window. Linda's small hands clutched the edge of Katherine's blanket tight, her knuckles white, lips twisted.

Katherine carefully pulled off her boots and placed them by the heater. She slid into bed beside her sister. Linda's eyes flickered open. She exhaled slowly.

"I thought you might not come back," Linda whispered.

"I'm sorry." Katherine's tongue fumbled for the other words she could say. She closed her mouth instead.

Linda pressed her forehead to her sister's, took her small hand in her own. They fell asleep like this, in the warmth and safety of each other, their breaths slipping into the night.

*

On New Year's Day the newspaper published a final piece on the two-week whirlwind of scandal. Katherine found it hidden in the fold of the front page, overshadowed by a Navy ship accident in Maine and the paper's predictions for the new year: Vietnam victory, equal rights for blacks, the death of rock and roll. The squished headline beside this bulleted list read, "Baby died of natural causes according to autopsy report."

“Pathologists determined that the ‘blizzard baby’ died of natural causes in utero,” the reporter wrote. “An analysis of the infant’s body found no trace of oxygen in the infant’s lungs. Results suggest that the infant was stillborn.”

Linda stepped behind Katherine and rested a chin on her sister’s shoulder.

“It will go away now,” she whispered. “No one will care anymore.”

Katherine’s hands shook as she reread the words. Her sweaty fingers smudged the headline ink.

They didn’t know. No one would know.

Had she imagined it? The baby’s cries, the soft wool scarf, the tension of the body as it fought against her hands.

No. It was real.

Katherine reread that word. “Stillborn.” *Of course Katherine wasn’t a murderer*, she imagined people saying. *Murderers don’t live in Samphire. And maybe it was for the best*, they would say. *What kind of mother would a teenage girl make anyway?*

For the best, they would say.

*

Katherine returned to school the next day, her stomach clenched with anxiety. She felt the cold eyes, the extra push and shove in the crowded hallway. Teachers avoided her gaze. Mr. Campbell flushed red to the roots of his hair and muttered something Katherine couldn’t understand. Mrs. Durham spilled her cup of coffee, staining a stack of ungraded papers.

By fifth period, someone had carved “slut” into the door of Katherine’s locker.

At lunch Paul kept close beside her, like a guard dog baring his teeth. When the lunch bell rang, someone knocked Katherine's tray down to the floor. Mashed potatoes and beef stew dripped down the front of her shirt.

Without a word Paul grabbed her hand and steered her into the girl's bathroom. He stared down a blond girl who monopolized the mirror, dabbing layer after layer of blush to her cheeks. She looked back at him, her tiny pink mouth open.

"Do you mind?" he asked.

She flipped her hair over her shoulder, cast Katherine a dark stare, and brushed past them. Paul wet a handful of paper towels and gently dabbed at the mess on Katherine's shirt.

"It's gonna be okay, Kat," he said softly. "We're almost out of here. And then you'll never have to see these fuckers again."

She laughed slightly, pressing a hand to her eyes.

"I don't know how much I can take," she said.

Paul grabbed a fresh wad of paper towel and wiped her cheeks.

"No one is going to understand right away. Maybe they won't ever understand. But you can't get let it get to you. You're too good for that." He threw the paper towel on the pink floor and squeezed her hands. "Someday soon, you and I are going to be in Boston. Or New York. Or Hollywood. Our best friends will be artists and poets. We'll both have men who love us to pieces." He blushed as pink as the floor tile, but smiled. "And people will listen to us and say, 'Wow.'"

Katherine smiled, the first genuine smile since that summer. She pulled Paul against her damp shirt and hugged him tight.

SPRING

Samphire never forgot Katherine, at least not in those last few months. The icy looks didn't disappear completely, but faded with time. Mrs. Dayes stopped attending church and the meetings for the Christian Women's Legion. She stayed in their dark house for days, easing into the upholstery as though she were fabric herself. Linda took over cleaning and grocery shopping, and Katherine learned to cook, following the recipes Evelyn left her.

In late January Katherine returned to Willie's, and Jack rehired her on the spot.

"This place wouldn't be the same without you," he said, tossing her an apron.

"I might be bad for business," she said as she fingered the white cloth. "Not many people like me around here."

"You think I give a rat's ass about the people around here?" Jack pointed a finger at her. "You're tougher than any soldier I know, and I'm proud to serve with you."

Tears threatened Katherine's eyes. "Thank you. That means a lot."

Jack swallowed, his large Adam's apple bobbing. He turned back to the grill and shuffled brown onions over the fire.

"Now don't go sentimental on me," he said, sniffing quietly.

As Katherine predicted, business at Willie's slowed to a trickle, but Jack brought her back each day. During the long, dull hours he taught her how to flip omelets and sear steak to perfection.

"You'll make a fine chef someday," he said.

Each night Katherine returned home from the diner and found Mr. Dayes in a drunken stupor. Canceled orders piled up on their counter. In early March, he tore down his lilac bushes, the ones he'd pruned so carefully that summer, and all the summers before. He hacked the branches from the snow and piled the carcasses in heaps. The next morning he left for work and never came back.

Days and weeks passed, each one a numb moment in the fog, another day to mark off before freedom.

*

It was the first warm day of March, the first sign of spring, the kind of afternoon when she first saw the boy on the docks. Katherine arrived home from school and stripped off her thin jacket. The Dayes house felt like a boiling teakettle. The thermometer was cranked up to the mid-eighties. A strong fire burned in the wood stove.

Katherine found her mother still and quiet on the sofa, her pale blue eyes moist.

"Mom?" she said. "Why is it so hot in here?"

A few beads of sweat formed on her mother's upper lip and the crease of her puffy cheeks as she slowly stood. Her white hands reached for an empty glass of melted ice. She tipped over a bottle of painkillers, scattering them on the side table. Mrs. Dayes stumbled a bit, and Katherine reached out to catch her elbows. The cup slipped from her fingers and shattered, sending glass skittering across the floor. Katherine jumped back with a gasp, releasing her mother's arms. Mrs. Dayes swayed like a blade of glass wavering in the breeze.

"Katherine," she said. Her hands fluttered loosely around her. "Help me upstairs?"

Katherine carefully stepped over the bits of glass and gripped her mother's arm again. A small trickle of blood streamed down Mrs. Dayes' foot. Katherine guided her mother one shaky step at a time until they reached the landing. The Dayes girls were rarely allowed into their parents' bedroom, and the sea foam green walls made Katherine hesitate at the threshold. She guided her mother to the four-post bed. Mrs. Dayes fell heavily into the sheets and clutched the silver chain around her neck. Hands trembling, she pulled the charm from beneath her shirt, unclasped the chain, and pressed the necklace into Katherine's palm. Katherine rubbed the silver, warm from her mother's skin, with her thumb. A tiny inscription was carved into the locket's face: "CT + AM"

"Open it," her mother said.

Katherine wedged her nail beneath the seam of the charm. The heart popped open, revealing a grainy black-and-white photograph of a young man with a crooked smile, his Army cap set jauntily over one ear. Katherine hesitated.

"Is that Dad?" she asked.

Her mother shook her head slowly. "No. That's Charlie."

"Who was he?"

"Someone I loved very much." Mrs. Dayes smiled slightly, creasing the lines in her doughy cheek. "We were sweethearts in high school. He asked me to marry him the day before he turned eighteen, right before he enlisted. The war was almost over, but he wanted to fight more than anything, to come back to this town a hero. So I said yes and a month later he went to Japan. He gave me this locket before he left. Had our initials engraved on it, see?" Mrs. Dayes'

smile faded. “He died two weeks after he got off the plane. Caught some kind of fever. Never even saw a battle.”

Katherine gazed at the photograph of the boy, his grin so confident, so happy.

“I was heartbroken.” Mrs. Dayes sucked in her breath. “And a couple months later I was... in trouble.”

“In trouble?”

“A girl’s kind of trouble.” She lowered her head.

“Was it,” Katherine swallowed, “was it me?”

“No.”

Katherine breathed slowly, her chest tight.

“Then what happened to... it?”

“I got married quick. Robert—your father and I had known each other a long time. He was five years older, good friends with my brother. He loved me, I think. At least he didn’t seem to mind rushing into things. Then a few weeks later the trouble passed on its own.”

“Did Dad know?”

“Not at first. Maybe. After you girls were born, I suppose he...” Mrs. Dayes’ voice trickled into the stale air. “He was good to me then. Better than I deserved.”

Katherine suddenly missed her father, missed the father he could’ve been if given the chance.

“You never told anyone?”

Mrs. Dayes shook her head. “Just Margaret.”

“Ms. Blythe?” Katherine’s heart flipped in her chest.

“She was my best friend. It was her idea that I get married. But when I told her what I did... Well, she never forgot. And made sure I never forgot either.”

Katherine’s throat knotted itself like a bow.

“Why are you telling me this now?” she asked.

“Because you should know how,” Mrs. Dayes fumbled with the buttons on her sleeves, “know what a coward of a mother you have. And what a brave—stunningly brave woman you are.”

Katherine touched her mother’s hand, noticing for the first time how worn and fragile it was. Her mother’s eyes closed, her breath slowing. Katherine shifted to the edge of the bed, careful not to wake her. As she tiptoed to the doorway, Mrs. Dayes’ voice drew her back.

“Katherine?”

She paused, one hand resting on the doorframe.

“You go get yourself far from here as you can.” The words were mumbled, tangled up in sleep. “Start over as someone else.”

“I will,” Katherine said. “I promise.”

She shut the door quietly behind her.

*

The sky melted to a minty shade of green as Katherine neared Margaret Blythe’s house. Snow drained in slushy puddles towards the sewer grate, and water gurgled beneath the street. A cool breeze nipped the back of Katherine’s neck as she climbed the long hill to the house, perched at the crest of the road. She stopped at the fence. Ms. Blythe sat in an old rocking chair, gazing down at Samphire below. Her white rabbit lay in her lap, shivering.

Katherine cleared her throat. “Ms. Blythe?”

The woman turned her head slowly, giving Katherine a cool stare.

“Hello, Katherine. What brings you out this evening?” Ms. Blythe stroked the rabbit’s fur. “I’m sure you know that Evelyn Partridge is no longer in town.”

Katherine pushed open the gate, her shoulders tense. “I know. I’m here to see you.”

Ms. Blythe glanced at the empty street behind Katherine. “I wondered when you would come to thank me.”

“Thank you?”

“Of course. What would you be if I hadn’t stepped in? A murderer. Guilty of infanticide. Hated even more than you are now. I had to pull a whole lot of favors to keep that one a secret.”

The words sank through Katherine’s skin. “But why would you help me? You’ve hated my mother for years. Why would you treat me any different?”

“It wasn’t you I was protecting.” Ms. Blythe rocked back and forth. “My father, my grandfather, his father... my whole family built this town. We’ve kept it safe, pure. And now I’m all that’s left. So it falls on me. I would do anything for this place.”

The rabbit quivered, its fur blurring with each shake.

“I’ve always had concerns about you,” Ms. Blythe continued. “You are your mother’s daughter, that’s for sure. I sensed the restlessness in you, in the other young people your age. So I’ve been keeping an eye on things. It didn’t take long to realize you were a bit enamored of that boy. What was his name again?”

“Dodge,” Katherine said softly. The word still hurt to say.

“Mhmm. He nearly did a lot of damage here. But I made sure his father knew I wouldn’t tolerate it. And now he’s gone for good. In fact, I heard that we lost him in Vietnam recently. Did you know that?”

Katherine swallowed, remembering those warm, black eyes.

“You were a more complicated problem. I tried to keep an eye on you, to befriend you.” Ms. Blythe squeezed the rabbit tighter. Its eyes bulged wide. “But I failed to help you that night, when you needed me most. I’m sorry for that. So once one secret was out, I had to hide the other. Make sure people knew that baby was dead in the womb. It’s better to be a foolish girl than a murderer.”

The words in the newspaper flashed before Katherine’s eyes: “Baby died of natural causes.” Ms. Blythe fondled the rabbit’s ears.

“But that being said, you did the right thing. Taking care of it the way you did.”

“I didn’t think God condoned murder,” Katherine said.

“You’re right there. But there are exceptions to everything. It was for the good of Samphire. Poisons have to be cut out, you know, to preserve the body. In the end, its death was a blessing. People will forget. And you and your daughter won’t be here to remind them.” Ms. Blythe looked up at the green sky. “The child is better off with her Father.”

“You must be happy now, then,” Katherine said.

“Almost, yes. I’ve nearly cured this town of its poison. The boy is gone. Ms. Partridge is gone. Your mother might as well be gone. The only one left is you. You’ve always been a bit stubborn, though.”

“I won’t be your problem much longer.”

“That’s a good choice, I think.” Ms. Blythe rose from her chair. The rabbit lay limply in her arms. “I hope you learned from all this, Katherine. And always remember that I did my best to help you.”

Back stiff, Katherine turned. She paused at the gate. “Does it ever get lonely up here, Ms. Blythe?”

“I’m never alone,” she said. Her eyes flickered back and forth. “There’s always someone watching.”

She set the rabbit down on the chair and stepped inside, shutting the door tightly behind her. Katherine stood at the gate a moment longer and watched the rabbit twitch once, twice, before lying still.

SUMMER

The moon was a chalk-colored crescent over Samphire. As Katherine walked, the early morning sunlight on her back, she imagined herself up there, moving among the stars.

According to the papers, it wasn't long until men would leave their dusty footprints in the sky.

Black-and-white grief had tainted the news that morning. The death of Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. a few months earlier. Flashes of Vietnam. Riots, protests, chaos.

Here in Samphire, the morning air felt ripe and humid, electric with heat. Mary Henson bathed sleepily in sunlight. Mrs. Gibbons bent over her blueberry patch, staining her fingers purple. A boy from Samphire High scrubbed his father's car until it glowed. As Katherine passed his driveway, she caught strains of the new Beatle's song playing on his radio.

"Make it better," Paul McCartney sang.

She repositioned her grip on her brown leather suitcase and walked on.

Earlier that morning, Linda had stood by Katherine in the doorway, her eyes bright.

"Write me as soon as you get there," Linda said, holding her sister tight.

"I will. Take care of Mom?"

Katherine glanced past Linda into the living room, where Mrs. Dayes lay in a tranquil doze.

"I promise," Linda said.

Her sister had stood at the doorway until Katherine turned and waved at the end of their street. Linda waved back, her long hair swaying in the breeze.

Katherine passed the ocean and Willie's, Evelyn's house and the shack, tucking each ephemeral moment into her bag. She finally stopped at the narrow green sign that marked the town border. Behind her, a small sign read, "Samphire. Established 1703." A warm, dew-kissed road stretched out before her.

A sudden lightness fluttered in her stomach. Katherine paused, feeling the moon tug her west as Samphire receded. She breathed in deep and stuck out her arm, fist clenched, thumb out, waiting for the next car to take her away.

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